Bhutan's Transition

SALMAN HAIDAR

In this season of discontent when so many regions of the world are wracked with turmoil and disorder, South Asia has gone through the processes of democratic change in largely orderly fashion. No old-fashioned dictators or hereditary rulers have clung to power in defiance of the popular mandate; none of the old guard have successfully distorted political processes in order to keep themselves in authority.

Over the last several months, there have been a series of elections across the region, and despite some scattered complaints of wrong-doing, the electoral losers have been obliged to make way for those who obtained the majority vote.

Moreover, democratic transition was not the outcome of urging by anxious outsiders: it was the local populations themselves in command. In some of the countries of South Asia democratic norms are well-established and political transition through the ballot can be taken for granted, but even where democratic processes have been interrupted all too often, as in Pakistan, elections have now been held successfully, and the government has been voted in and has not got where it is by simply assuming authority. The contrast with what is taking place in many other parts of the world is striking.

Most recently, the elections in the kingdom of Bhutan have taken the story of democracy in the region an important step forward. This was the second general election conducted in Bhutan under the new arrangements developed in that country and it produced decisive results. The incumbent government was roundly defeated and has been replaced by the former opposition.

Remarkably the chanoeover has been calm, almost a matter-of-fact happening, and while winners and losers would have experienced the elation of success and the pangs of defeat, they have played their respective parts without any demur or complaint. Nobody has brought dark accusations to suggest that they were unfairly undone nor is there any sign of the kind of witch-hunt that tends to surface at such times. Bhutan has passed the test of political change with flying colours and takes its legitimate place in the democratic conclave.

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The untroubled transition should not mask the magnitude of what has been achieved. Three or four generations ago, Bhutan seemed an unlikely field for anything other than the endemic strife in which it had been engaged for the greater part of its independent history. Its narrow, parallel valleys separated by ranges of steep mountains encouraged the kind of self-sufficient and autonomous fiefdoms seen in other parts of the great mountains, making any sort of consistent nationwide rule very difficult to attain.

There were also unhelpful external factors to be handled, involving the rival demands of the former Tibetan overlords to the north and the burgeoning power of the British to the south. For well over a century the rulers of Bhutan threaded a careful independent path between the two, even while they competed constantly among themselves for ascendancy at home. It was only in the last part of the 19th century that a powerful local ruler was able to expand his domain to bring the greater part of the country under a single authority. From him descended the royal dynasty that has led the country ever since