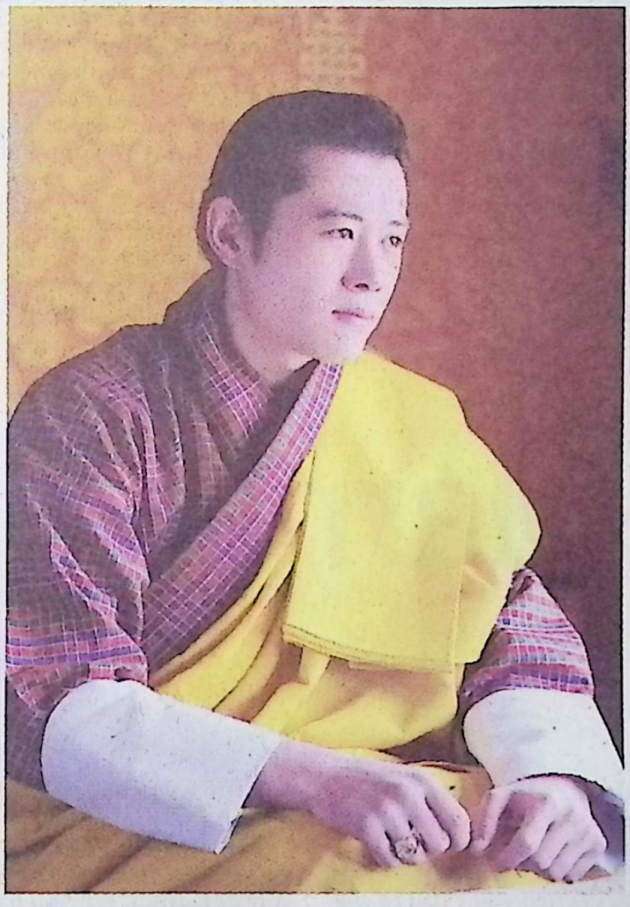
and remains enthroned today. It is their visionary leadership that has brought extraordinary change to the country culminating in the popular democracy that is now so well established.

Unifying and consolidating the state was the work of the local rulers themselves, not something brought about by the intervention of an outside power. Similarly, the carefully managed evolution of a traditional monarchy into a popular democracy was the work of Bhutan itself, unbidden by present-day proponents of the democratic creed. A succession of enlightened monarchs concluded that the country's cohesion and long-term security lay in strengthening not the monarchy but the instruments of popular rule.



King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck

The people, who were not at the start prepared for such innovations, were asked to elect representatives to a central assembly whose power to manage affairs was gradually enlarged to the extent that it even had the authority to recall the king, though this power had to be forced on the representatives, for they revered their monarch as the symbol of their country and source of authority.

In keeping with this approach, the institutions of state were meticulously built up to take responsibility for day-to-day affairs, to adjudicate disputes, to select civil servants, to provide for public education and social and economic advancement, to modernise the functioning of the state, and only then to adopt a Constitution.

It was after thorough preparation over several decades that Bhutan entered the era of democratic rule. By then it was already sturdily established on its present-day foundations and able to take to the new demands without a hitch. The mantra of "one person, one vote", which can have profoundly disturbing consequences elsewhere, found ready acceptance in Bhutan which was by now thoroughly prepared. It was able to elect a government for itself, and now to change it.

The new government in Thimphu is largely drawn from a new generation of young and well-trained individuals, many of whom have been educated abroad. Typically, the new breed was schooled in Bhutan itself and then had a spell in a university outside the country before returning to work as public servants on the way to entering political life. They are notably younger than their predecessors who were themselves fairly youthful: the prime minister is 47 years of age and several of his key ministers are even younger.

The gerontocracy that remains entrenched elsewhere in South Asia has been conclusively dispelled in Bhutan and the trend towards bringing in new, well-educated individuals familiar with the international environment, which was already visible in the recent past, has been, reinforced. There is no electoral promise that the new incumbents will bring about major change but a number of number of local issues affecting daily life have been flagged in the party manifesto. What is on offer, and seems to have public endorsement, is a down-to-earth programme of considerable practical consequence, without disturbing the basic policy structures of the state.

While India will applaud the democratic success achieved by this close and very friendly neighbour, it will have to be watchful about bilateral ties. Bhutan has evolved fast, and as the public domain has expanded, so too has public opinion about the features of the relationship with India. This has become a new dimension in the relationship and will need sustained attention.

The main current story, however, is of democratic success in Bhutan that reflects well on that country and on the entire South Asian region.

The writer is India's former Foreign Secretary.
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