

Democracy: Present and Future in Bhutan

Dr. Pawan Kumar Das^{1*}

ABSTRACT

Democracy as a form of government implies a government of the people or for that matter a people's government. It has come a long way from the Greek ideas of Demos and Kratos and in fact this journey in the tiny Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan since 2008 seems to be one of a regime initiated one. It holds all the trappings of being depicted as yet another model of guided democracy, like the ones prevalent in Turkey (since Ataturk), in Pakistan under the martial law administrators as well as under Pervez Musharraf, Indonesia (under Ahmed Sukarno) and others where, democracy is and was looked upon as an institution under the protection of the armed forces. And this incident made way for autocracy in those countries. In Bhutan, the custodian appears to be the monarchy and the monarchs themselves. The framers of the 2008 constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan make every effort to insulate their document from political quagmire by putting in place certain qualifications namely that candidates contesting the poll should be graduates only, making way for the technocrats to run for the elected offices. This has been justified on the ground that lessons learnt from the neighborhood as well as from others that it is vital to keep the newborn democracy away from the chaos and all the churning effects of politics. In this paper, I will discuss whether it could be categorized as another example of a guided democracy. For the present time this guided democracy seems to continue without much of a problem but in the future it might give way to some other form or perhaps political turmoil. Therefore we need to look at the other Greek idea of Kratos meaning people's rule.

Keywords: *Democracy, kingdom, transition, future democracy*

Democracy as a form of government implies a government of the people or for that matter a people's government. It has come a long way from the Ancient Greeks to Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg speech to the one that we see around us in the developing world. The most important aspect of this form of political allegiance is supposed to be the central ideas of Demos and Kratos. Demos means the people, while Kratos means to rule. Here, the aspect of rule by the people is of utmost importance. This journey of democracy in the tiny Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan seems to be one of the nature of Guided Democracy or a New Democracy, since it holds all the trappings of falling within the fold of such democracy seen in past and present day Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, Korea, Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Turkey. The democratic evolution of the Kingdom of Bhutan could be understood as something which from its very inception as a nation state in the modern sense of the term was under some form of guidance since 1907. The event of the

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Mandar College, Ranchi University, Ranchi

*Corresponding Author

Received: December 14, 2025; Revision Received: March 28, 2026; Accepted: March 31, 2026

signing of the Gyenja on the thirteenth day of eleventh month of Earth Monkey Year or 17 December 1907 is a pointer to that. The local chieftains and the lamas with the blessings from the 2 British in the form of the presence of John Claude White elected Sir Ugyen Wangchuck as the first hereditary monarch of the Wangchuck dynasty of Bhutan on the same date. The journey received its nourishment at the hands of His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck. His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, depicted as a Himalayan Revolutionary introduced the Tshogdu (National Assembly) in 1953, followed by a Royal Advisory Council (Lodey Tshogdey) in 1965, coupled with several reforms in the economic, social, cultural, defense and in foreign relations. This process of democratization and decentralization continued under the Fourth Druk Gyalpo King Jigme Singye Wangchuck particularly in the form of local governance in Bhutan since the 1980s. And in all these, there was the presence of the visible hand of the monarch as if His Majesties were able to foresee the final ushering of Bhutan into a Guided Democracy in 2008. This process of guiding the nation in its course to the first ever democratically held election in 2008 was continued by His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck. In fact, observers have rightly pointed out that "...His Majesty sits through the sessions of the Tshogdu on a high gilded throne, taking notes and even occasionally intervening in the debate.", which proves the point that the monarchs are as concerned parents, as father like figures have been guiding the course of democracy in the country. This model of democracy can equally be qualified as one which is paternalistic as well as which is regime initiated. The command of His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck to draft a written constitution for the kingdom, the following consultations by the monarch with the subjects, the latter's reluctance and the gentle force behind them, all but point to the fact that the monarch's role in setting up a democratic model in the country. The process of democracy solely originated from the king. The presence of Article 10, Section (7) in the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, which states that the Druk Gyalpo may address or sit in the proceedings of either House or a joint-sitting of parliament as and when deemed expedient; moreover, Section (8) of the same Article states that the Druk Gyalpo may send messages to either or both the Houses as deemed expedient, are beyond the ordinary powers or functions of any chief executive of any given country. As just like any head of the family in any given Asian society, possessing Asian values the monarch happens to be the guide as well as the custodian of the nation, protecting the people from every crisis.

Present status of democracy

The call for the first democratic election by March 2008, and the call for the formation of political parties to contest the polls and the command to the subject to participate through various addresses and visits all across the country proves the point that democracy in the country is played according to the rules of the guardian, the philosopher and the king. In fact, if we happen to look at the idea of democracy of the Ancient Greek philosophers, then, there we would find the notion of a delegated democracy in the form of philosopher kings in the Greek city states, and the idea that the 'best flute to be given to the best flutist', in such an ideal form of democracy. That is why, if we refer to the electoral laws of the country which put in place certain qualifications namely like that candidates contesting the poll should be university graduates, and they may seem to be a precondition of democratic election in Bhutan which may not hold water when compared to other models of democracy in the west. This is a great leap forward. If this system is tried later, it will not be possible to implement. However, it is in fact providing a better condition for democracy by providing the educated candidates to overcome the 3 chaotic conditions to be seen in the neighborhood. This was once tried out by President Pervez Musharraf in the 2000 in Pakistan. But people sympathetic to chaos and the so-called churning effect of democracy did not appreciate it. In Bhutan all the current political parties in the political fray, which right now are altogether five in number

Democracy: Present and Future in Bhutan

(Druk Phuensum Tshogpa, People's Democratic Party, Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa, Druk Mitshe Tshogpa and Druk Chirwang Tshogpa respectively), are all but guided by the philosophy of the guardian monarchs. The philosophy of Gross National Happiness. This phenomenon is not something which is taken out from the Ancient Greeks like Plato, but we do find its variant in the Asian neighborhood as well. Democracy, infect, does not have a single strait-jacket model. Democracy has grown according to the said context of a given society. And Bhutan's New Democracy is that of Bhutan only. It is not something which has been copied from the neighboring variants. While studying this variant of Guided Democracy or New Democracy in Bhutan we cannot help but take reference to the Confucian societies of South East Asia and East Asia, namely, the city-state of Singapore. In fact, Singapore's founding father, Lee Kuan Yew chose order, prosperity over chaos and disorderliness that one sees in the case of India. This proves that democracy as what the West encourages gives too much of emphasis upon individual rights and not the particular context in which a democracy may operate. The obvious outcome is like that of India where too much of individual rights have created a condition of chaos. For that matter every single activity of the government in India seems to have a smell of scam or corruption and nothing else according to the common perspective and as according to the news reports. In fact, every other day the citizens get to hear reports of scam, from Telgi, 2G, and Commonwealth Games to Coalgate and to SAIL gate. More so, there are no consequences (I mean to say no report of government seizure of property etc., to set an example for the guilty has been ever reported,) for the fall guys as only they are followed by some more scam or more allegations of economic corruption. The armed forces in the country are also not insulated completely from such corrupt allegations (for example, Adarsh Housing Society scam, Sukna Land scam etc.). Some may suggest that what is happening to Indian democracy is but a sign of its vitality or the so-called 'churning effect' which might lead to more democracy meaning perhaps more chaos! Hence, it is better for smaller countries with smaller populations to entrust this business of democracy into the hands of educated elite candidates and the guardians of the polity just like the philosopher elites in Plato's Ancient Greek city states. The guardians may be in the form of highly educated technocrats, bureaucrats, or the armed forces or some other individuals and in some other forms. People may argue for individual rights over and above prosperity in accordance with what the West had to say, but I feel as first and foremost as an Asian, in the midst of so much of chaos and deprivation where people are still fixated with a rice-bowl perspective of democracy, that we need ordering first and which would automatically lead to prosperity and all our other fulfilments. Asian values, Confucian values, values of the benevolent leaders' like Gross National Happiness, all point to the fact that any purest form of democracy, if there is any, can be withheld until overall prosperity has been achieved. Here, let me be very clear, that is, in no way, I am trying to make a case for the like of what the Chinese leader Deng Xiao Peng had to say in support of spilling blood of pro-democracy students during 1989 Tiananmen Uprising.

Bhutan and Guided Democracy

In spite of the late start to the so-called modern path of development almost five decades back Bhutan under the benevolent guidance of the enlightened philosopher Kings have surpassed even India and Sri Lanka in terms of per capita income in South Asia. And there is every possibility for making a more remarkable progress through harnessing more of its water resources and transforming them into energy for export to the energy starved countries of the region. This is no ordinary feat. It started with the benevolent King overseeing the sessions of the Tshogdu on a high gilded throne, taking notes and even occasionally intervening in the debate in violation of Westminster's most sacred principles. But as the Bhutanese explain, they do not need to blindly obey alien conventions. As a matter of fact their parliamentary

Democracy: Present and Future in Bhutan

institutions are developing in co-operation and not in opposition to the throne. For example, from being one of the most backward countries in South East Asia where political instability, corruption, legacy of rampant colonial exploitation, Indonesia under the guidance of Ahmed Sukarno and that of General Suharto provided a New Democracy, a new identity for the nation and its people. In fact, Indonesia did emerge as one of the roaring Asian Tiger economies until their crisis. The country still remains under the guidance of the military turned civilian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Again, from just a mere backwater and a renegade province of the PRC, Taiwan, too has risen to the status of one of the biggest economic investors in the mainland China under the guidance of Chiang Ching-Kuo, the son of Chiang Kai-Shek and the Kuomintang party. Korea after the Korean War, was one of the most backward countries in Asia, even backward than India in the 1950s with large incidences of starvation deaths occurring in that country. But if we currently look at the strength of the Korean economy, we will find it to be one of the biggest foreign investors in India. In fact, that country started its journey under the guidance of strongmen like Sygman Rhee and the likes over the years. And currently it has become a functioning western type liberal democracy under President Lee Myung-bak. Hence, the point that gets vindicated over here is that in the words of Lee Kuan Yew, “with few exceptions, western form of democracy has not brought good government to new developing countries. What Asians value may not necessarily be what Americans or Europeans value? Westerners value the freedoms and liberties of the individual. As an Asian of Chinese cultural background, my values are for a government which is honest, effective and efficient”. “We decide what is right; never mind what the people think”. Even during the time of Suharto, the Indonesian regime followed the same model. Therefore, whether it is in Korea or in the city-state of Singapore and elsewhere, the leader is looked upon as the ideal father, who is perhaps next to God perhaps, and there is the obvious mix of Fabian socialism and Confucian collectivism. In fact, Habermas had once pointed out the emergence of intimate human relations within the bourgeois family as an essential infrastructure of the public sphere. This approach is once more vindicated by S.W.R.de A. Samarasinghe that, East Asian democracies will always be influenced by a Confucian community-oriented approach that places less importance on individual rights, a view that is contrary to the American tradition of democracy that gives primacy to individual rights.

If we now turn our attention to Burma (Myanmar), we would find there the existence of yet another model of guided democracy. The Burmese generals have freed “Daw” Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest and the lady has even contested the parliamentary polls and has entered upon the new parliament (new parliament is a creation of the Burmese generals like, Than Shwe or Thein Sein) while accepting the overrule ship of the generals. At the same time, she is also busy making trips to the western capitals to attend numerous award ceremonies, like the one in the US where she received the Congressional medal, addressed the British parliament, and at the same time was careful to draw foreign investors into Burma. But she seems to be not fully aware of the plight of her own people, namely the ethnic Rohingyas in the Rakhine state. The lady wishes to keep the issue to be resolved by the nominees of the generals only, forgetting that a similar incident did take place in 1991 under the rule of the Tatmadaw. In fact, she has probably realized that economic growth must come first to her country and then other rights, be it even Human Rights. Probably, the Tatmadaw has also realized the potentiality of the lady in drawing foreign investments into Burma. And the example does hold the view that even in the near future the armed forces shall remain the chief participant in national politics.

Democracy: Present and Future in Bhutan

Perhaps one of the finest examples of guided democracy could be that of Turkey. Turkey is culturally different from a region like Bhutan but it remains as an iconic model for all the guided democracies at the present as well as for the future. In Turkey, since the 1920s, under its chief architect Mustapha Kamal Pasha the armed forces have remained a guardian of Turkey's democracy and secularism. The model that was buttressed by several military coups during 1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997 has remained an example and a subject of envy for the rest of the Middle East including the Arab world and other Muslim countries, deserving emulation. Since, Turkey has shown the path to a fusion of Islam and westernization or democracy to the rest of the world. The armed forces have remained a guardian and the supreme protector of democracy, playing the role of Plato's philosopher kings. At the present however, this rule of the guardians seems to have come under extreme stress following the trials of several generals by the present government especially of Abdullah Gul and Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government. But the present government cannot simply sacrifice this model and make way to yet another typical orthodox Middle Eastern model. The world is in fact keeping a close watch over the course of this democratic model. However, the model created by Ataturk remains open to be emulated anywhere else. And this takes us to the case of Pakistan where the generals through the coups of 1958, 1977 and 1999, have tried to provide a guided democracy to the country. The justification has remained very simple and straightforward. The misrule of the civilian elected governments under various names has robbed the people and the country of a prosperous future. The functionality of the civilian governments therefore has invited the men-in-khaki to come and play the role of nation builders. So, whenever there has been a crisis faced by the state the army comes to its rescue, "*fauj aage aati hai*". The army as nation builders or the custodians of that country was forced into the role of administering it and securing it from sham democracies. As being a pool of highly disciplined and motivated men amidst chaos and political feuds they have kept the country intact. Although under the present army commanders right now, they seemed to be in no mood to tackle the administration of the Pakistan state. In Malaysia even the governments under Mahatir Mohammad and currently under Mohammad Najib Bin Tun Haji Abdul Razak are known for taking the course of guided democracy. The prosperity of Malaysia as depicted by the dazzling twin Petronas Tower overlooking the Kuala Lumpur skyline by night is a reminder of the model before the rest of the world.

Future of Democracy

Some have succeeded while others have gone down unceremoniously in promoting order, prosperity to the very people they represent and they serve. But one thing is very clear that there cannot be a single meaning for democracy all across the table. As long as our values differ, we shall have differences in adopting democracy as a model for guiding our aspirations. In fact, for the present time this unique Bhutanese model of New Democracy seems to have functioned well. And as long as the people and the enlightened leaders in general adhere to their unique Bhutanese values like Gross National Happiness, we see no trouble facing the nation and its people. The present generation of leaders who are former civil servants and technocrats, are fully committed to the goal of achieving their understanding of happiness or prosperity as portrayed by enlightened monarchs, and it shall be passed down to the next generation as part of a rich Bhutanese political culture. Hence, for the immediate future the leadership of the country need not worry much since they are providing an alternative model to chaos and disorderliness which seems to have become a part of the general discourse of sub-continental politics.

As far as the overall interest of the people and their involvement in the rule remains, the focus of the administration of the country fully qualifies to be called democratic or perhaps New

“Bhutanese” Democracy. This process could be strengthened by enhancing the representation of minority groups and women. Since the women do not occupy a very dominant position in terms of political decision making, arrangements must be put into place to enable this group to take a rightful place in such policy making processes. This could be done by reservation of seats in the major political parties or in the legislative bodies. This prevailing condition of women is a result of a type of political culture which provides a very limited role to women especially in the political fields. The number of university graduates or their numbers in higher education or a few chosen ones in the higher echelons of government bureaucracy is just not sufficient for taking them ‘on board’. In fact, the foundation of the enlightened leaders could be enhanced by providing a rightful place for the women in the policy decision making process. Equally, all the minorities must be reached by the enlightened leadership through a process of dialogue. And every dissent could be turned in to support by the leadership. The income gap between the regions and between rural and urban Bhutan must also be addressed so that any elements of disgruntled section could be taken care of. All these would lead to the creation of a right kind of political socialization leading up to political development and not decay. And the examples of Singapore and Malaysia could be referred to in this context. The future of New Bhutanese Democracy holds every possibility of emerging as a shining example in its own right.

REFERENCES

- Heywood, A. (2003), *Political Ideologies*, Palgrave Macmillan, London
- Gallenkamp, M. (2012), *Heidelberg Paper*, May 2012
- Ura, K. (2010), *Leadership of the Wise*, Centre for Bhutan Studies,
- Parmanand (1992), *The Politics of Bhutan Retrospect and Prospect*, Pragati Publications, Delhi
- Royal Government of Bhutan (2008), *The Constitution of Bhutan*, Thimphu: Kuensel Corporation
- Musharraf, P. (2006), *In the Line of Fire*, Simon and Schuster, UK Byrnes, Sholto, Price of Freedom, guardian.co.uk,
- Zakaria, F. (1998), *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, Fareed Zakaria, Newsweek International Editor; *the Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew*, Singapore: Times Edition
- Foster, P. (2010), in Beijing, *The Telegraph*, June 04, 2010, UK, Accessed on <http://web.worldbank.org>
- Tan, T.K., *Sukarno’s Guided Democracy*, Oey, Hong Lee, (1973), *Indonesian Government and Press during Guided Democracy*, Review by Palmier, Leslie, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Cambridge University Press
- Chao, Linda, and H. Myers, Ramond, (1998), *The First Chinese democracy: Political Life in the ROC or Taiwan*, John Hopkins University press,
- Shin, Kwang Yeong, *Cultural Tradition and democracy in South Korea*, Chungang University, Chung, Chulhee, Chonbuk National University, <http://arts.monash.edu.au/korean/ksaa/conferences>, Cited in: Chua (1999); Moody (1996), Samarasinghe, S.W.R.de, [www.hsph.harvard.edu/ihs/publications/...](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/ihs/publications/), (July, 1994), Title: *Series on Democracy and Health, Democracy and Democratization in Developing Countries*,
- Siemers, Gunter, (1993), *Myanmar 1992: Heading for Guided Democracy?* South East Asian Affairs, Institute of South East Asian Studies,
- Finer, S.E., *The Man on Horseback: the role of the military in politics*, Boulder, Colorado; Cohen, Stephen P., (1976), *Civilian control of the Military in India: Theory and Cases from Developing Countries*, Albany: State University of New York Press

Democracy: Present and Future in Bhutan

Cohen, Stephen P., (1971), *The Indian Army: its contribution to the development of a nation*, Berkley, University of California Press;

Stephen P. Cohen, Stephen P., *The Pakistan Army*; Huntington, Samuel P., (1957), *The Soldiers and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil Military Relations*, Cambridge: Massachusetts, Harvard University Press.

Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Das, P.K. (2026). Democracy: Present and Future in Bhutan. *International Journal of Social Impact*, 11(1), 334-340. DIP: 18.02.035/20261101, DOI: 10.25215/2455/1101035