

## Polling ends in Bhutan, Himalayan state becomes newest democracy

Heavy voting was recorded in Bhutan as the Himalayan kingdom Monday held its first parliamentary elections on its way to becoming the world's newest democracy, marking the end of 100 years of monarchy.

'There was brisk voting and we expect the overall turnout to quite high,' Chief Election Commissioner Dasho Kunzang Wangdi said.

Three hours before polling ended at 5 p.m., more than 60 percent of balloting had been recorded.

The elections were held for the 47-member National Assembly or the lower house in parliament with 318,465 registered voters eligible to exercise their franchise in the largely Buddhist nation of about 600,000 people.

Bhutan's first elected prime minister will be from among the National Assembly members. A national holiday has been declared in this Shangri-la of jaw-dropping beauty for the vote.

Counting of votes has begun and the first results are expected late Monday. 'The final results are expected by Tuesday morning,' Wangdi said.

'I am feeling really excited after casting my vote,' said Sangay Dorjee, a young businessman.

Men in colourful 'ghos', full-sleeved robes tied at the waist, and women dressed in 'kiras', sarong-like wraps, lined up at polling stations in Gelephu in southern Sarpang district, the constituency with the highest number of voters at 11,803. Gelephu borders India's Assam state.

'I have literally created history. I was among those who cast our votes in the first few minutes after voting opened,' Tenzin Wangdi, a young college student, told IANS.

Monks clad in maroon-robos and tonsured heads offered prayers at a monastery by lighting butter lamps as Bhutan marched towards democracy.

'We really don't know what is there in store for our country. We hope everything goes fine under the new system,' an elderly monk who identified himself as Tshering said.

Members of the royal family and those directly associated with religious institutions are not allowed to vote.

The polls are monitored by 42 observers from India, the European Union, Japan, Canada, the US, Denmark, Australia, Netherlands and officials of the UNDP.

'A total of 5,184 polling officials engaged to conduct the elections,' the chief election commissioner said.

The elections are the culmination of a plan by former king Jigme Singye Wangchuck - who handed his crown to his young Oxford-educated son Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck in December 2006 - to change with the times and relinquish absolute rule.

Jigme Khesar has since assumed charge as Bhutan's new king.

The former king had set the process in 2001 for Bhutan's transformation from an absolute monarch to a parliamentary democracy that led to the country having a new constitution.

The king would become head of state after the National Assembly polls next year, but parliament would have the power to impeach him by a two-thirds vote.

*Syed Zarir Hussain* ( © IANS / India eNews)