

Bhutanese unsure of democracy's outcome, but feel change is good

Having relished their country's isolation for years, not many Bhutanese are sure if the historic poll held in March, which transformed their quaint Himalayan nation from a kingdom to a democracy, is going to make a qualitative change in their lives.

The century-old rule by the hugely popular Wangchuk dynasty ended as the world's newest democracy, nestled spectacularly in the Himalayas between giant neighbours India and China, elected 47 members to the national assembly.

'I am happy yet unsure of how democracy is going to translate to changes on ground. We've always been stable under the kings but I guess this experiment is going to take time to show results,' said Dawa Penjor, an official in the information and communication ministry.

Even the country's home minister, Minjur Dorji, believes the result of the election will take time to percolate and people should have patience to understand the true meaning of the kingdom's path to democracy.

'It (democracy) is yet to be tested and for this to happen we need to wait as political change is gradual. But the very high turnout of voters during the elections shows people embraced change,' Dorji told IANS.

For this tranquil country of less than 650,000 people that still prides in sticking by the concept of prioritising Gross National Happiness (GNH) over Gross Domestic Product (GDP), education and health care are free and most villages have water and electricity.

But there are problems as unemployment, especially in the rural hinterland is rising, and a huge swathe of the population still lives below the poverty line.

Khandu Om Dorji, the media coordinator of the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) or the Bhutan Peace and Prosperity party, which won the March election, says the move towards democracy was inevitable as the country modernised.

'Sure, we take pride in our traditions and culture but at the same time we have to give people better lives. And if we are to properly harness our resources using aid and investment it will need to factor in the people.

'I think elections were the best step in Bhutan's process of modernisation and development,' she said.

Kunga Tenzin Dorji has another take on the elections.

'Look, we could have carried on with monarchy and people would be just as happy. It is important to remember that democracy has not come through armed rebellion or revolution. The king thought it was a much needed step,' Kunga told IANS who was part of the media delegation with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

The DPT, led by Prime Minister Jigme Thinley, won 45 of the 47 seats while the People's

Democratic Party (PDP) bagged the remaining two seats in the election.

The poll was the culmination of an initiative by Bhutan's royal family in 2001 when former king Jigme Singye Wangchuck handed over daily governance to a council of ministers and finally stepped down in favour of his son in late 2006.

More than 60 percent of registered voters cast their ballots in an experiment that saw India facilitate the democratic process.

Electronic voting machines (EVMs) were brought in from India, two Indian Air Force helicopters dropped election guidelines to inaccessible mountain locations, while mules and horses carried voting apparatus to ballot stations.

Former Indian diplomats Salman Haider and Shyam Saran were observers as well.

Perhaps Manmohan Singh, who came here for two days, had the last word. In his historic address to the national assembly Saturday, the first by an international leader, he pointed out that democracy is not merely about holding elections.

'Democracy requires sustained commitment to tolerance and the judicious exercise of power as a societal trust to be used for public good. It requires a deep commitment to the rule of the law,' he said.

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