

Only graduates can contest Bhutan elections

Bhutan's draft constitution has made provisions to debar candidates without a minimum graduate degree or married to a foreigner from contesting the first general election in 2008.

'To be a minister one must win a seat in parliament and be a member of the ruling party, besides meeting the minimum academic qualification as enshrined in the Election Act,' Bhutan's Chief Election Commissioner Dasho Kunzang Wangdi was quoted as saying by the nation's government-run newspaper Kuensel.

Bhutan's Election Act, currently being drafted, has proposed that a candidate must have a minimum bachelor's degree to enable him contest the parliamentary elections.

'They (the elected parliamentarians) should be complemented by academic qualification so that their analytical and decision making capabilities would be proficient,' Wangdi said.

Bhutan's literacy level is lowest in South Asia, around 42 percent with just about 3,000 graduates in the country of 600,000 people.

The draft constitution, which is to be ratified after a referendum next year, also debars a candidate from contesting the elections if he or she is married to a person who is not a Bhutanese by birth.

King Jigme Singye Wangchuck last December made a landmark decision to abdicate the throne in favour of his eldest son, Crown Prince Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck, 25, before Bhutan adopts a constitution and elects a prime minister in 2008.

Bhutan's election commission said some 400,000 voters would be eligible to exercise their franchise in the 2008 elections to choose the first democratically elected government.

'If approved (the draft Election Act), most of the present elected representatives cannot stand for election to the parliament,' Kuensel said in a story posted in its website.

The transition began five years ago when the king handed over the powers of daily government to a council of ministers and empowered the national assembly to force a royal abdication if three-quarters of its membership backed the motion.

In 2004, Bhutan unveiled a 34-point constitution and the same was sent to some 530,000 citizens for their views. The constitution is expected to be ratified after a referendum.

Once adopted, the constitution will replace a royal decree of 1953 giving the monarch absolute power.

King Jigme Singye Wangchuck is the fourth ruler in the Wangchuck dynasty that came to power in December 1907.

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