

Bhutan's new king addresses people, seeks support

In his first public address as Bhutan's new ruler, King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck Sunday sought the support of his people to build a strong nation and help the country shift from monarchy to parliamentary democracy.

'It is now our responsibility to take the country forward by following the legacy and the good work done over the years for the welfare of the nation by my father,' the king told a large crowd of people at capital Thimphu on the occasion of Bhutan's National Day celebrations.

This was the king's his first public appearance after his father Jigme Singye Wangchuck abdicated the throne and handed over reins to him by a royal edict Thursday.

At least 35,000 people thronged the Changlimithang stadium in Thimphu to have a glimpse of the king. The Wangchuck dynasty was established in 1907 on this day.

'It was a very passionate and touching speech with the king harping on the theme of development and the legacy left over by his father, the former king. The new king also touched on the issue of Bhutan's transition from monarchy to democracy,' Mingbo Dukpa, managing director of the Bhutan Broadcasting Service, the national broadcaster, told IANS by telephone from Thimphu.

The king's nearly 20-minute speech was uninterrupted with the crowd listening with rapt attention. 'It was a real delight to see the new king addressing the nation. His speech had the stamp of maturity and full of thought provoking messages,' said Ugyen Dorjee, a businessman who was at the meeting.

The king also appealed to locals in all the 20 districts in the country of about 700,000 people to 'follow the footsteps of his father' and realise his 'dream' of building a stable nation.

The former king signed a royal decree on Dec 9 handing over power to his son, although it came into effect Thursday during a formal announcement made at a special meeting of the cabinet in Thimphu.

He had made a landmark decision December 2005 to abdicate the throne in favour of his eldest son before Bhutan adopts a constitution and elects a prime minister in 2008. The handing of power to the crown prince was earlier scheduled just ahead of the first general elections.

The sudden decision to hand over reins to his eldest son had stunned the largely Buddhist nation. The new king is the fifth ruler in the Wangchuck dynasty.

The transition began five years ago when the former 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, it will replace a royal decree of 1953 giving the monarch absolute power.

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