

Bhutan's tryst with democracy begins, two parties formed

The race for political supremacy in Bhutan has begun with two political parties formed as the Himalayan kingdom prepares to shift from monarchy to parliamentary democracy after the first general elections in 2008.

Bhutan's national newspaper Kuensel Saturday reported the formation of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the Bhutan People United Party (BPUP), the first two parties to contest the elections in 2008.

'We have been working since His Majesty's (King Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck) command to form political parties in December,' Tshering Tobgay, coordinator of the newly floated PDP, was quoted as saying by Kuensel.

An unnamed serving minister in the National Assembly is leading the PDP and includes as its members retired government officials, businessmen and community leaders.

'After the announcement of the constituencies, we have identified potential candidates in the constituencies in consultation with the local leaders,' Tobgay said. 'We have been registering members. The response from the people is good.'

The BPUP said in a statement that the party was formed by four serving Royal Advisory Councilors and 73 chimis (people's representatives to the National Assembly). A third front formed by 17 university graduates was dissolved soon after it was floated.

'A graduate from the party said that they had to dissolve the party because they lacked credible leaders. Some of their parents also reprimanded them not to waste their time,' the report said.

The formation of the two parties came two days after Bhutan's Election Commission expressed concern over lack of any political activity or formation of parties in the run-up to the first general elections.

'We expect at least three credible political parties to come forward,' said Dasho Kunzang Wangdi, Bhutan's chief election commissioner.

'We would like to remind the voters that there cannot be democracy and elections as envisaged in the constitution without the participation of multiple political parties in the primary round,' Wangdi said in a statement earlier this week.

The Commission has fixed July as the deadline for registration of political parties under the Political Party Formation rule, which requires a charter, agendas, office bearers, list of members and branch offices among others.

Bhutan earlier this month announced there would be 47 constituencies in the country, the members of which would be elected to the National Assembly or parliament in the first general elections.

Former King Jigme Singye Wangchuck last December abdicated the throne in favour of his eldest son, Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck, 26. The transition began in 2001 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.

Bhutan in 2004 unveiled a 34-point constitution and the same was sent to around 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.

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