

Encouraging turnout in Bhutan's historic mock polls

The final round of mock elections in the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, a dress rehearsal for the planned transformation of the 100-year-old monarchy to democracy, ended Monday with moderate to heavy polling.

'Polling has ended peacefully and the turnout has been quite encouraging. A final voting percentage could be available later as we are in the process of compiling figures from remote areas,' Bhutan's Chief Election Commissioner Dasho Kunzang Wangdi told IANS in capital Thimphu.

Results of the mock polls are expected late in the night with counting of votes beginning soon after the vote closed at 5 p.m.

The two-phased dummy elections - the first round was held on April 21 - were aimed at familiarising voters and officials about election procedures ahead of the first general elections in 2008 when the Land of the Thunder Dragon shifts to parliamentary democracy.

'We are now ready to conduct the real elections next year with these dummy polls giving us a chance to test our preparedness,' Wangdi said.

Parliamentary elections are due to be held before June 2008, 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 - to change with the times and relinquish absolute rule.

The polls were monitored by observers from India, Denmark and the UN.

With Monday declared a national holiday, men in colourful 'ghos', full-sleeved robes tied at the waist, and women dressed in 'kiras', sarong-like wraps, lined up at polling stations much before voting opened at 9 a.m.

'The feeling was good and we now know how to vote and what elections are all about,' Leki Wangmo, a college student, said.

Monks with tonsured heads, clad in maroon robes, offered prayers at the Tashichhodzong monastery here by lighting butter lamps as Bhutan marches towards democracy.

'From our hearts we want the monarchy to continue. But since the decision to usher in democracy has already been taken, we are praying so that nothing unforeseen happens in Bhutan,' said Lama Dorji, a 31-year-old monk at the monastery.

Tashichhodzong is the highest seat of Buddhism here and also houses the king of Bhutan's throne.

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

Despite people coming out to vote, some remained sceptical.

'The excitement is definitely missing with people in general utterly confused as to what democracy

would bring to the country,' Gopilal Acharya, the 28-year-old editor of the Bhutan Times, the kingdom's only independent weekly newspaper.

An estimated 283,506 people were eligible to vote in the mock polls.

The Election Commission estimated that some 400,000 people in the country are eligible to vote although just about 71 percent registered their names.

The first round of the dummy polls involved voters choosing their favourite colour - the challengers being the Druk (Thunder Dragon) Blue Party, the Druk Green Party, the Druk Red Party and the Druk Yellow Party.

The Yellow Party that stood for 'ensuring unity of the country through preservation of traditions, culture, and values' emerged the winner in the first round. The Red Party that promises to work towards industrial development of Bhutan came second.

'In the first round people voted for the political parties and in the final round people are voting for candidates of the Yellow and the Red parties that emerged as top two winners in the primary round,' Wangdi said.

The candidates - students chosen randomly from high schools - belong to the two fictitious parties, the Yellow and the Red.

The same electoral procedure would be followed in the real elections next year.

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