

# GOOD KING NOW, BUT BAD KING LATER? BHUTAN SHOULD CHOOSE DEMOCRACY

by Nick Gier

Tucked away in the Western Himalayas with Nepal to the West, China to the North and India to the South and East, the Kingdom of Bhutan, half the size of Indiana with two million people, is slowly emerging from a century of isolation.

The government is an absolute monarchy—there is no constitution or bill of rights—but the current king Jigme Wangchuck, who has been on the Dragon Throne for 34 years, is well regarded by his subjects. Married to four sisters and educated at Harvard, King Wungchuck likes to say that Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product.

Many of the king's actions have been praised by outsiders as well as insiders. A royal decree banning logging exports to India has kept the Bhutanese landscape healthy and beautiful. Taking seriously the Buddhist belief that the Himalayas are mountain goddesses, the king has banned mountaineering while allowing trekking in the foothills.

Tourism has been limited to 6,000 visitors a year and access to Buddhist sanctuaries, statues, and paintings is severely restricted. Tourists are allowed to see some Buddhist festivals with mask dancing and the display of huge thangkas, elaborate paintings of Buddhas and lamas. The king has made the preservation of traditional religion, dress, and architecture a top priority.

Motorcycle taxis, which foul the air in all other South Asian cities, are not allowed in Bhutan. The Bhutanese are mindful of the mistakes which they believe the Nepali government has made, actions that have led to horrible pollution in the Katmandu valley and widespread environmental damage.

Many Nepalis are not happy with what they think are unfair comparisons between the two countries. With only a slightly faster population growth, Nepalis live 199 per square kilometer while the Bhutanese figure is 43. The Nepalis also remind the Bhutanese that there are 100,000 Bhutanese refugees still living in Eastern Nepal.

Nepalis have a lower infant mortality rate (75 per 100,000 vs. 100 ) and a higher longevity rate (57 years vs. 54), but the Nepali literacy rate is only 27.5 percent as opposed to 42 percent in Bhutan. At \$760 per year, Bhutan also has three times more per capita income than Nepal.

In order to improve the welfare of its people, the Bhutanese government is now offering free education (all in English) and free health care. The Bhutanese are not embarrassed by a high divorce rate, because they believe that it demonstrates the power that Bhutanese women have always had to determine their own destinies.

When I first visited Nepal in 1992, I witnessed the Nepalis' love for their Hindu king, as thousands of them lined up to receive his personal blessing. On June 1, 2001, under very suspicious circumstances, King Birendra and seven members of the royal family were assassinated. Gyanendra, the surviving younger brother, ascended to the throne.

Using the threat of a Maoist insurgency in the countryside as an excuse, the new king dismissed the Parliament and shut down the press and all other media. Early in 2006 massive Gandhi-style nonviolent demonstrations forced King Gyanendra to reintroduce democracy, a process in which even the Maoists have agreed to participate.

The Bhutanese king is seriously considering abdicating and allowing a freely elected parliament to govern the country. Many Bhutanese, especially those in the villages, are not sure if they want democracy. Some of them believe that a king would take better care of them than politicians who would form alliances with the wealthy and the powerful.

When I visited Bhutan in 1999, our tour group had dinner with Bhutanese businessmen and women who had ambitious plans to develop their country. I was impressed with their energy and their English language skills, but I can understand why people in the countryside might not trust them with their country's future.

The Bhutanese have learned many good lessons from their neighbor to the West, and they should choose democracy, however imperfect it might be, rather than a future king gone bad with no legal recourse against him.

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