

BHUTAN



Symposium on Sharing Best Electoral Practices

“Innovation in Election Management: Some Fresh Practices from
Bhutan”

27 January 2009

Synopsis

Dasho Kunzang Wangdi is the Chief Election Commissioner of Bhutan who was appointed under a Royal Decree to establish the first Election Commission for the Democratic Constitutional Monarchy under the Constitution when the King decided to transform the country into a democracy. He spearheaded the drafting of three key electoral bills. He also conducted the first parliamentary election in 2008 under the watchful eyes of international observers and the world media. He had studied in India and the United States and was involved in the establishment of the Royal Civil Service Commission, Royal Institute of Management, Royal Audit Authority. He was the Auditor General of the Bhutan prior to being appointed as the Chief Election Commissioner of Bhutan. He would see through the second parliamentary elections in 2013.

He will present the initiatives that were undertaken towards preparation of the Kingdom of Bhutan to undertake the first parliamentary elections and the experiences gained in conduct of the same in the year 2008 when a Parliament was elected for the first time in the history of the Kingdom. He will share some Bhutanese experience Voter Registration System; Bhutan Electoral Education Training Strategy (BEETS); Religion above politics; Prescribed qualification; Dispute Settlement; Civil Society and Local Government Election non-affiliation to political party ; Public Debates; Use of EVM; Campaign financing; Education of Prisoners their voting; Transport management and arrangements; Border sealing; Voting in remote places; Election campaign; Reaching out to the youth; Paying voters to come and vote from difficult areas and in far polling stations; Formation of political parties.

1. I, on behalf of the Election Commission of Bhutan, thank the Election Commission of India for making it possible for me to participate at the International Symposium, "Sharing Best Electoral Practices" when the Election Commission of India is celebrating 60 years of successful conduct of Parliamentary and State elections contributing to the largest working democracy in the world. On behalf of the friendly people of Bhutan, the Election Commission of Bhutan and on my own behalf I would like to seize this opportunity to heartily congratulate the past and present Election Commissioners and officials throughout the Republic for their steadfast services rendered to electoral democracy. And we wish you well for the future to continue on this path with success and confidence to make the Indian democracy even greater.
2. The year 2008 was for more than one reason a special year for us in Bhutan. We celebrated the coronation of our King, a hundred years of peace, prosperity and progress under the rule of four successive Kings of the Wangchuck Dynasty and the introduction of parliamentary democracy.
3. In the year 1907, our forefathers took a historic decision to unanimously elect the First hereditary King in Bhutan. In the year 2008, a century later, the same sovereign authority was handed over by the King to the people with the change in political system from Monarchy to a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy with an elected Parliament under the Constitution.
4. By the grace of our Beloved Monarchs and the collective good fortune of the Bhutanese people, we have been able to materialize

the noble initiative of transiting peacefully and successfully to a Democracy.

5. It is a fact that this is attributable to the Clarity of the Vision and Guidance of His Majesty the Fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the inspiring leadership of His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, and the dedicated and professional conduct of all officials and agencies involved in the elections.
6. The Election Commission of Bhutan was established under Royal Decree on 31st December and the office inaugurated on January 16, 2006. In a sense, the whole process and experience upto this time for the Election Commission was an opportunity for innovations as elections in the peaceful transition of the Bhutanese polity is in itself an innovation.
7. In this regard, I would like to share some of the unique experiences we had in terms of innovations in election management, ranging from use of multimedia for voter education to various means of ensuring fair election campaigns to public transport arrangements.

(1) Bhutan Electoral Data-base System (BEDS), Voter Registration and VPIC

The citizenship identity card database of the Department of Civil Registration could be shared with regard to all eligible voters which not only resulted in saving of resources but also a fool proof Electoral Roll for the first parliamentary Elections.

The electoral data base system, Bhutan Electoral Data-base System (BEDS), has been developed in-house to digitize the Photo Electoral Roll to ensure efficient and error free updating and maintenance. It has been further developed into a web-based electoral information management system where a voter can not only check information but also view other information on election related matters. We look forward to the day when a Bhutanese voter can vote online.

To avoid the inconvenience of long waits at the polling stations, a software has been developed to help in the verification of the voter record efficiently against the Voter Photo Identity Card (VPIC) issued to each registered Voter.

VPICs with colour photographs of the eligible voters were issued to every voter without themselves being required to visit an election office. The same copy of the photographs used for the citizenship identity cards were used in the VPICs and distributed widely at major urban centers as well as in the County of their registry.

The VPIC contains the location details of a voter's Polling Station for easy reference of a voter. We intend to upgrade it into a dynamic decision facilitating system.

To avoid long wait through easy identification of voters on a poll day the ECB is undertaking a project to introduce biometrics in voter registration and identification system.

**(2) Bhutan Electoral Education & Training Strategy (BEETS);
use of Documentary, Posters and Videos**

Nationwide Mock Elections were successful in educating voters as well as training officials. We recommend this in a situation where elections are held for the first time or major reforms/changes in the electoral systems are being introduced.

Through the Bhutan Electoral Education and Training Strategy (BEETS), the Election Commission undertook voter education and civic education nationwide by training the trainers who subsequently reached out directly to the voters in classroom mode.

The use of posters, music videos, animated clips, radio jingles as well as information brochures on “hot” issues of common misunderstanding were produced and distributed for voter awareness. In particular the brochures in simple local language could be read out to illiterate parents by the school going children.

(3) Religion above Politics

The Royal Family, Religious Persons and Religious Organizations are required to remain above politics by law and this was found effective in avoiding divisive campaigns of emotional issues.

(4) Academic Qualification

The Electoral Laws in Bhutan require that a candidate intending to contest Parliamentary Elections have higher

academic qualification with a minimum of a formal university degree from a recognized institution of higher learning. Besides possessing positive leadership traits, a candidate has to be free from influence of money and muscle power. Bhutanese parliament is not only youngest but the most qualified one, as stated by the Honorable Prime Minister of India while addressing inaugural session of the First Parliament of Bhutan in May 2008.

(5) Election Dispute Settlement Body

A grievance addressing system at Central-level with the Election Dispute Settlement Body (DSB) chaired by an Election Commissioner has been established to hear and settle election disputes effectively.

Further, based on our experience, we are going for decentralization of the mechanism in the future so that disputes as far as possible are settled speedily as well as in the local context especially the minor cases.

A manual has been developed to ensure proper handling of cases in the field by the District-level DSBs.

Regular Press information is released and media interviews and broadcast programmes entertained to ensure that electoral process and information is available and open and the transparency of the process are enhanced.

(6) Civil Society

We also involve the Civil Society Organizations to play a role in promotion of the fundamental rights and freedom of the people but without the Organizations being engaged in supporting any political party or candidate.

(7) Public Debates

During the Election Campaign period, televised debates were sponsored by the Election Commission between the political parties and the candidates. In fact, the feedback indicated that these debates played very significant role in helping voters make up their minds as to which party or to whom should be given the votes. This also ensured that the media coverage of elections is equal and up to the standards.

(8) Use of Electronic Voting Machines (EVM)

The EVM is used not only in elections but it has been used in Parliament, Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industries, and various school and institutions elections which promoted familiarity and confidence in the EVM.

(9) Clean Politics & Elections

The Election Code of Conduct for Political Parties, Candidates and election officials were imposed to guide and ensure their conduct in elections is legally binding.

In order to ensure level playing field for the political parties and the candidates, the campaigns for elections to the National Assembly and the National Council are state financed. The

State provides the costs of media time, space and as well as cash provision to cover field expenses. Bhutan is indeed fortunate to enjoy strong political will as enshrined in the Constitution, to conduct clean elections.

Similarly the Contribution one can make to a Political Party is also regulated and Expenditure Ceilings are prescribed for Political Parties and Candidates to spend for an election.

Expenditure and income for non-election period are also required to be submitted to the Election Commission so that the Party accounts are transparent and as per the laws.

Party accounts are subject to scrutiny by both the Election Commission and auditing authority as well as made available for public viewing. Election Commission of Bhutan in cooperation with the national tax authority and the Anti-Corruption Commission endeavour to ensure integrity in our politics while the local government public functionaries and media also play an active oversight role in this effort.

(10) Postal Ballot facilities for inclusive participation

The members of the civil service, the Armed Forces and their spouses and trainees and students, are eligible to vote through Postal Ballots. The personnel working in essential service sectors such as Power, Telecom, Mass Transport, Hotels and security agencies in private sectors were also given postal ballot facilities to vote.

Prisoners are given the privilege to take part in the democratic and electoral processes. In this regard, Postal Ballot facilities

along with voter education programme were also extended to the Prisoners.

(11) Transport arrangement

For a mountainous country travelling to Constituencies and Polling Stations to vote may be very discouraging. In order that the non availability of public transport to travel to the places of poll does not become an issue, arrangements were made to have public transport at reasonable rates with predictable time and safety was ensured through out the nation on the poll day.

Public transport services were extended to over all motorable roads, so that no voter is discouraged from travelling to vote.

Helicopters reached men and material for Polling at remote places.

(12) Sealing of Border

Cooperation was sought from the security services to ensure that international borders were sealed on the day of poll for the safety of voters and the poll process.

(13) Long-term placement of Polling Teams to Overcome natural barriers

The Election Commission paid adequate remuneration to polling officials who were required to bear hardship and stay longer duration under harsh climatic and physical conditions to conduct subsequent elections in areas otherwise inaccessible.

(14) Reaching out to youth and children in schools

Efforts are made to reach youth out to and children in schools and institutions to bring awareness and through them motivate their adult members of families and society to communicate and be informed on the election issues.

(15) Paying Voters to Cut Election Cost and Enhance Efficiency

In very special cases of small pockets of areas being inaccessible for the polling teams, the voters were paid to travel to the nearest convenient place.

(16) Special Arrangements at Polling Stations

Polling Assistants: Respecting gender sensitivity, lady Polling Assistants were designated in every Polling Station to guide or frisk female voters.

Exception: Elderly voters or disabled voters or mothers with infants were given preferences in the queue at a Polling Station.

First Aid medical facilities and security coverage was put in place to ensure safety of voters and election officers. Welfare and comfort of election officers and voters were given equal importance.

Use of computers with Search Software e-Search provided in the town areas where population is high so that the Polling Officials can search and find the names of the voters instantly thereby reducing the waiting time at a queue.

We also intend to hold simultaneous poll for various posts through use of multiple EVMs in our Local Government and municipal elections.

(17) Election Advertising Boards

Dedicated Election Advertising Boards were installed through the country at prominent public locations to reach the electoral messages and information including the party campaign materials. Thus the restriction on putting up materials on unauthorized places were fairly and effectively enforced.

(18) Declaration of the Election Result by the same day

In the interest of efficiency and do dispel any doubt of manipulation, every Polling Station is converted into a Counting Center immediately after the close of poll. The Polling officials in the presence of Party/Candidate Representatives function as the Counting officials and carry out the Counting. The result is instantly transmitted through prescribed mode and manner to the respective Returning Officer. This enables the results to be determined and announced at the end of the Poll Day itself.

(19) Lessons Learnt from the Parliamentary Elections

The Learning from Experience Programme (LEP), a self-assessment of the first Parliamentary Elections was conducted to ensure election management improvement through opportunity provided for feedback from the election officials and village leaders. Such a programme was found most useful.

We see on our horizon the Year 2013 when the Nation will go to the polls again for the second Parliamentary Elections. We envisage facing many challenges in 2013 parliamentary elections. Therefore, this conference would be good input for us to prepare for the challenges ahead.

We look forward to further benefit from the Indian election management system which is most dynamic and well organized authority and also from the innovations of other nations.

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