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## **A happy country fears democracy**

This April and May, Bhutan took its first nervous steps towards something called elections. Two mock polls were held. People were encouraged to choose from four fictitious parties and place their vote.

The parties were named after colours — Druk Red, Druk Yellow, Druk Blue and Druk Green. (Druk in the Bhutanese language Dzongkha means the thunder dragon, the kingdom's national symbol, and so the word is a ubiquitous prefix.) The first party, Druk Red, promised industrial development. Druk Green espoused a healthy environment. The blue party promised free services like healthcare and education. Druk Yellow touted the promotion of Bhutan's rich cultural heritage. Not surprisingly, Druk Yellow won hands down both times. Favouring Bhutan's cultural heritage and tradition implied favouring the monarchy. Bhutan's less than one million population was happy with the monarchy.

Phuntsok Rabten, involved in the construction business and co-owner of a karaoke bar says, "No one's comfortable with the move to democracy. There were cases of villagers turning in their newly issued citizen ID cards during the mock elections. They put the cards in the ballot box. This shows the lack of awareness regarding concepts such as anonymity and democracy."

At the heart of Bhutan's infatuation with monarchy is the fifth Dragon King of Bhutan, His Majesty, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, who is 27, six-feet tall, broad and handsome. He loves basketball. And his three-pointer shots are the stuff of legend. Last June, when he, as crown prince, attended the celebrations of the Thai King's 60<sup>th</sup> coronation anniversary in Bangkok, his female fan-following swooned. At home, he appears on posters, mobile phone screen savers, and computer wallpapers. He's an icon. For the Bhutanese, he is bigger than Elvis.

He is the country's head of defence, and the world's youngest head of state. In 2003, when the Royal Bhutan Army fended off the ULFA and destroyed their camps, he fought from the frontlines. Come 2008, when Bhutan becomes a parliamentary democracy, he'll be there to relinquish power.

It was his father, the fourth King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who first nudged his country into democracy. And it was he who introduced the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) to his people as a way of measuring the kingdom's progress. Evaluating GNH includes criteria such as the preservation and promotion of cultural values, protection of the environment and good governance.

Bhutan has been rated one of the happiest nations in the world by surveys. This happiness, that is so evident in the country's routine, lies in a tenacious simplicity. Thimphu is the only capital in the world that doesn't use traffic lights at signals. Instead you'll find a good old policeman, who almost never needs to use his whistle. The streets are spic and span wherever you go, and there's no jaywalking. Advertising is minimal — there's not a single garish hoarding in sight, and stores put up their names and details on old-fashioned wooden boards. Entire cities follow a distinct architectural pattern that reflects Bhutan's Buddhist culture. If a new building crops up, it had better fit in with its surroundings.

People don't work beyond 6 pm here. It is compulsory for the citizens to wear the national dress at work and school. Men wear a robe with knee-high socks, while women wear a skirt and jacket. No one seems have any complaints about this. Healthcare services are free for the Bhutanese. Education is funded by the government.

The Bhutanese people are so happy with the present state of affairs that the only thing that worries them is change. "No one really understands the need for change," says Kunga Dorji, a 34-year-old English lecturer. "Of course, the people respect the King's decision, as he knows best."