

May 28, 2007

Bhutan's royal astrologers plan for 2008 elections

By Syed Zarir Hussain, Thimphu

Yeshey Rinchen looks like any other maroon-robed Buddhist monk chanting hymns at the famous Tashichhodzong monastery, the summer residence of the head abbot of the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan.

But 47-year-old Rinchey is no ordinary lama. He is one of the four royal astrologers that the monarchy in Bhutan consults on matters as varied as destiny, finances, travel plans, marriages, and even fixing dates for elections.

"I have just come back from the palace after fixing the king's (Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck) travel itinerary. Everything has to be auspicious and worked out accordingly," Rinchen told IANS at the monastery in the native Dzongkha language and translated by a Bhutanese travel guide.

Rinchey and other members of the Buddhist religious leaders shift to Punakha during the winters - Punakha was Bhutan's capital until it was shifted to Thimphu in 1955.

The monastery's Master of Discipline (astrology), Rinchen is a busy man today - and so are a number of state astrologers who are on the payrolls of the Bhutanese government. "We have an enormous responsibility on our shoulders now with the king asking us to find out auspicious dates for the elections (the first parliamentary elections in Bhutan slated for 2008)," the master astrologer said in a matter-of-fact manner.

The monarchy in Bhutan, one of the last sovereign Buddhist kingdoms, has for generations been guided by astrologers with superstitious beliefs and strong religious dogmas dictating each and every aspect of their lives.

"Our predictions and findings are based on calculations, movement of the planets and stars. We don't seek divine blessings while making forecasts or deciding auspicious dates for any important event for the royal family or for Bhutan," Rinchey said.

Retaining the esoteric form of Mahayana Buddhism, the people of Bhutan have for ages been firmly rooted to Buddhist traditions with the lunar calendar followed in its totality while deciding anything important event.

"We have already calculated and found out some auspicious dates for the 2008 elections - we cannot divulge all the details but then there are dates in March, April and May for the elections," the revered astrologer said.

But the Bhutanese constitution bars religious leaders from either contesting or voting in elections. The fact that even election dates are to be decided by astrologers was corroborated by Bhutan's Chief Election Commissioner Dasho Kunzang Wangdi.

"The state astrologers would first give a set of dates for the 2008 elections and the king might take a second opinion from his own team of astrologers (Rinchey included) before the final dates are announced," Wangdi told a visiting IANS correspondent.

Bhutan is making a historic shift from monarchy to parliamentary democracy with the former king Jigme Singye Wangchuck abdicating his throne in favour of his son December and announcing the first general elections to be held in 2008.

The elections are to be held before June 2008 as the National Assembly or parliament would meet that month.

Tashichhodzong, meaning the fortress of the glorious religion (Buddhism), is a medieval pink-roofed monastery built first in 1641 and also houses the king of Bhutan's throne. First built by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, the monastery was reconstructed in 1962 by the late king Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, the grandfather of the present monarch.