“Responsibility has changed, lifestyle has not”

Kuensel: March 6, 2019

How has life changed in four months?

Nothing has changed because my number of work hours, 15-16 hours a day has not changed. Instead of spending at the OT, I spend at the PMO. And twice a week, I always go to the hospital and most Thursdays, unless it is very important, I start from the hospital. So over all, lifestyle has not changed, responsibility has changed. Until now, I was concerned with treating patients. Now I am concerned with treating policies. My reach has changed as well. Instead of getting in touch with a single patient, now I am in touch with 750,000 people and that takes a lot of my sleep away. Whenever I think about signing a document that will change, not just this generation but even has the potential to change the next generation, I lose a heartbeat.

What is the experience like as the prime minister of Bhutan?

The PMO is using the most effective power – that is the persuasive power to implement changes. I am very happy so far because I have no preformed ideas. I just want to see how I can deliver. As a hard-core member of the medical fraternity, as a passionate surgeon, I want to treat this country like my patients. I want to look at the country as a patient, all the plans and policies like the different organs of the patient, and see if there are any tumours. There are many tumours actually. I came with that mandate and I am excited because I have all the individual right to do it. So there is excitement with the power to persuade, to request and I think I will be happy to perform as the prime minister.
What is the best thing of being the prime minister?

I don’t know about others, who have been there and who will come, but I am interested to scan governance very closely. I always hear that our policy in tourism is high value-low impact. Nobody, until now could convince me of this policy because under this policy, every year, every government, every institution has just been counting the numbers. Where is the link between counting the number and high value – low impact?

RCSC – their policy is small, compact and efficient while the civil service is ballooning. From a regular civil servant to a consolidated contract, everything is managed from that office. So why won’t it balloon out and if that is the case, then why is the motto, small, compact and efficient? I don’t see the link at all.

You say private sector has to be developed. BCCI came to me and said, if you don’t give us an X amount, we will have to close down our office; we have no business, no mandate. I thought the role of BCCI is to be the link between government and private sector but BCCI themselves don’t know where they stand.

GNH – We say just measuring wealth is not enough. I was shocked to see that every government and every individual, at the end of the year count the GDP; I was shocked when the national council and the opposition questioned our target of GDP. Our philosophy of governance is not GDP based, it is GNH based. A major component of our manifesto is social factor, which will not result in increased GDP. It will only stabilise the base of GDP. Aren’t these the discrepancies in the way we think?

Good that our development philosophy is GNH. Practice that. Don’t dwell so much on GDP. Good that civil service wants to be small, compact and efficient. Then don’t get ownership of every individual that wants a job in the country. Let agencies take care of those. You be worried about the critical service mass. Tourism – convince me that you want to keep the number of visitors small.

So, the best thing about being the PM is that I have realised these differences, these hypocritic approaches. I will use all my persuasive power to get an answer to this. Change this for that. Otherwise, we will just be atsaras.

And the worst is?

Simple. The worst part of being in the government, especially after 2008, is that achieving 100 percent of your target is not enough. People will never be happy with you. There are more politically minded people than genuinely nationalistic minded people. Whatever good you do, people will take the negative side even though we know that there are two sides to the story. If there are people who view this very critically and then if it’s really bad, they must pound on us and let us not continue with that. But when you do good things, set aside your political jacket, come out in the open and support.
You said that DNT’s agents of change would function beyond the norm and deliver change for better. How satisfied are you with your team and yourself in the first four months in office?

Whatever I say and do is well thought about. One thing for sure is, even at gunpoint, I will not say anything to please anyone. That being the qualification, we are here to bring in the desired changes, and we are working very hard on this. Until now, so far, so very good. I have an absolutely dedicated team who I listen to and who listens to me. We meet very frequently. Officially, the cabinet meets twice a week – cabinet meeting on Tuesdays and on Fridays, which we call the Densa meet. I also have written agreement with the ministers; we call it MAMA (Monthly Assessment of Ministerial Activities), taking lead from APA.

Ministers will submit in writing what they would be doing in the month. I assess them every 10 days. They are also happy. My cabinet members are reading as if they have their final exam tomorrow. So I am very happy that I have a young but professional team.

You said, “If there is a wound in the country, we have to do anything to heal that wound.” What is your diagnosis?

Oh yes. If you have noticed, the biggest wound that we must all realise is the political wound, the divisive politics that we always had, which if you don’t intervene correctly and timely, can be a malignant wound. In the last almost four months, I never blamed the past government. I acknowledged a lot of their good deeds. Say for example, earn and learn programme in Japan. It’s not doing well. We all know that. The intention of the past government is good. Just because it got wayward doesn’t mean the intention was bad. If you are to play the political game, I could have blamed the past government 110 times by now. All good intended programmes and policies do not function very well anyway.

Even at the first parliament session, we never finger pointed the opposition. And whatever proposals they made, we considered, made changes to the plans and policies according to their suggestion if we found them correct. So, isn’t that a big attempt by a politician to heal the political wound? Because on the other side, we could have done many things to further divide it and to make the wound gape by now. We are here to bring everyone together.

What is that one decision that you are proud of to have made in the last four months and one that you are regretting or felt that you could have done better?

Let me take the second one first. No regrets as of now because being new in governance without any experience, every step we take, every word we use, we are on a very careful side. I have enough decision-making moments at the hospital. Taking cue from there, it’s the same mind, the same soul that is in action, be it as a surgeon at the OT or the PM. The way I couldn’t afford to make a mistake in the OT, I couldn’t afford to make a mistake in this chair.
On the success front – too early to comment, because all activities we have initiated have not borne results yet. There is no single action that I had taken of which I can be proud of. All actions we have taken are well measured, well discussed and we are looking forward to it because it is the beginning.

But we are very serious with the policies. I had a meeting with DHI the other day. Druk Holdings and Investments – I said, that the holding part is easy. Through change in policy, DHI can hold any company. I said if you want to hold more, convince me that you can manage it better. If I am not convinced that your investment part is not wise, I will shrink your holdings.

**What would you consider to be the biggest challenge for the country today?**

Economy obviously. In 2023, we are going to graduate from LDC group. We will become a low middle-income country by the end of October 2023. But if you dissect this out, we have consistently qualified in two out of the three indicators. The third indicator is economic vulnerability – we never qualified on that.

To solve that, the initiative we have taken is forming a private sector development board that will advise us; we have tasked BCCI to advise us and the finance ministry to see the efficiency of our fiscal policy. In 2023, the dynamics will be different. As a developing country, there will not be many donors and we must be able to convert the donors as trading partners. We must learn how to do business with them. We are going to review critically the role of private sector. A country cannot do without private sector development and the biggest problem we have is unemployment while the biggest generator of employment is the private sector. Then we want to use our foreign policy, use the foreign ministry and embassies outside, not just for bilateral relations, but to bring in economy. We are trying to capitalise on economic diplomacy and our ambassadors should be looking for trading partners.

**In 2013, you were reprimanded for speaking on issues in the health ministry such as the procurement system and many doctors being unhappy with the system. How has it changed? What do you think is the biggest problem in the health sector today?**

The ministry of health must have changed in the last six years but that doesn’t mean they are very efficient. Again, my radar is on them to give me a good projection into the requirement of specialists. Health care is the top of our agenda. How should health care be in the 21st century? Can we be able to carry on with this so-called free health care? The nation is very happy about free health care but we spend only about three percent of our national budget on health. The moment we say we have free health care in the country and budget is little less than three percent of the national budget, any economist will know that we don’t have good quality health care. Free health care at three percent of national budget is cheap health care. So if you want to be happy about free health care and quality healthcare, the national budget expenditure on health care should be in double figures. That’s the biggest target I have.
In the health system, universal health system is universal health coverage. We all talk about that but under universal health coverage, there is one component called quality health care. Quality health care has four components – infrastructure, relevant equipment, relevant HR and good polity to take care of this. Do we have all these components – infrastructure, more or less, yes. I am happy with the infrastructure. Relevant equipment? No. Relevant HR? No. Good over arching policy? No. No. No. No. So we need to fix this. Quality component is about HR component, the doctors, nurses and technicians. Here the health care we provide should be safe, timely, effective, efficient equitable. One of the biggest problems is equitable health care and we don’t have that. And it should always meet the patient’s need. We need an over arching policy considering these aspects. If we have it in some shelves, I don’t know. But I don’t see that.

Water – both for drinking and irrigation is a problem all over the country. The government pledged to address this. What is being done?

We are into the formative stage of having a centralised body, any authority that will be responsible for taking care of all water related issues in the country. We haven’t yet put it in black and white but we have been talking. We really don’t care how much its cost, we will look for money because this is one of the best investments this government could do. This needs lots of input, discussions and we don’t want to fail. You rush, you fail. Of all the pledges that we have, water pledge is the biggest, both in terms of capital investment as well as in reach and effect on the nation.

Our hydropower projects have become synonymous to debts and delays. How worried are you? Should the people be as worried?

Yes, but should not be losing sleep over this. We just need to be careful with it. We cannot manage our hydropower without letting our debt go up. There is absolutely no second way of doing it. You want hydropower; you have to borrow because you don’t have the resources or the skills to do it. If anybody has a second way of doing it, I would be more than happy to give this chair to that person.

Since we are worried, we are reviewing the hydropower policy. Hydropower will be one of the most important revenue earners, but how far should we go? The 10,000MW by 2020 is already down the drain. We don’t even have 5,000MW and 2020 is just knocking on the door. So, 10,000MW by 2020 was a very ambitious target. Thank god we didn’t go about achieving that otherwise, this country would have been in a very different situation. The debt would have doubled and if it were a mistake, then it would have been too late to undo that.

So in hydropower, the general principle that I shared with experts who are formulating this policy is – let’s go slow. Today, whatever is being done is done with good intentions. All mishaps and delays are happening because of geographical accidents that we cannot control.
There was a three-day big deity pleasing ceremony at Punatshangchhu. So we are doing everything. What the engineers can see, we are fixing. What they can foresee and forecast, we are preventing. What the engineers cannot see, we are invoking our deities to help us. Mangdechhu is a success story without much delay and is doing well. All in all, the hydropower sector is not all gloom. Just because Punatshangchhu is getting delayed badly.