



SADF COMMENT

## Bhutan's smooth transition to democracy Rabi C Dahal

With successful second LG election, the tiny kingdom has demonstrated to the world that it has successfully put in place system and processes capable and tested to ensure free, fair and genuine elections.

Bhutan's eight-year-old democratic culture is gradually taking roots as the country prepares itself to face bigger challenges on its way to become a vibrant democracy. The kingdom had successfully conducted its second local government election on September 27 for 1477 posts. With it Bhutan has demonstrated to the world that it has successfully put in place system and processes capable and tested to ensure free, fair and genuine elections.

Although the voter turnout, at 55.8 percent, was not very impressive, the election was historic. Of the 402,149 eligible voters 224,460 exercised their franchise. It also saw about 150 university graduates contesting for various posts of which 40 of them were elected. The election also saw maximum women participation with 150 of them winning.

There was no quota or reservation for women. The advocacy programmes initiated by various agencies encouraged women to come forth and contest the elections. The maximum participation by women in

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Reg. Num. BE 833606320

**Keywords: Bhutan, Elections, Democracy** 

the LG electoral democracy is proof of commitment of our women exercising their fundamental rights and duties. Women representation at the grassroots level is as important and female leaders will play a vital role in Bhutan's fledgling democracy.

The second democratic local government elections have been a huge success, according to the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB). Although a considerable number of positions could not be filled due to lack of candidates. A total of 3391 candidates contested and 1423 of them were elected. Two candidates died and some of the constituencies didn't have a candidate contesting. However, ECB has shown a remarkable organisational capacity in conducting free, fair, and democratic election of a large scale. The commission told media there were no major glitches during the election period.

The sceptics critical of Bhutanese with low literacy rate (63 percent as in 2012) not being in position to play a responsible role, in the democratic transition, are being proven wrong. Our people have shown that they are politically responsible and aware of their right, duties and obligation. They are competent to make correct priorities even if they are from the rural section and no one can take them for granted.

In a largely rural country the LG members are important not just in carrying out vital duties towards achieving development objectives of the people, but also in bringing about a harmonious and united society. Although the elected members of the local governments don't have the legislative authority, as the nearest and closest level of government to the people, the local governments play an important role in ensuring that the democracy and development reaches all corners of the country. The new LG has the mandate to complete the on-going 11 five-year-plan at both the dzongkhag (district) and gewog (block) level. It will also be instrumental in preparing the 12 five-year-plan.

Democracy did not come to the Bhutanese overnight. It was a carefully planned process full of hard work and sacrifice, led by His Majesty the fourth Druk Gyalpo Jigme Singye Wangchuck. Dzongkhag Yargay Tshogdus (district development committee) were established as far back as 1980 and Gewog Yargay Tshogchungs (block development committee) in 1990. Decentralisation and empowerment of the

grassroots has been a constant process, culminating in the transfer of powers from the Throne to the people under democracy. In the exercise of these powers, local governments are invaluable to the people. Today, the elected bodies have the authority to make rules and regulations that are consistent to the laws passed by the parliament. With democracy, the authority and the scope of the LG have been enhanced.

With the democratic elections, the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan has consolidated and strengthened the decentralised system of governance. The institution of local government in Bhutan is apolitical and thus non-partisan with full authority to represent the people in their own right. In effect, unlike in other countries, parliament and the national government can act on most matters only those originated or endorsed by the local government entities. The local bodies can function independent from the centre, enjoying authority on the use of resources to carry out their responsibilities. The Dzongkhag Tshogdu (district council) at the Dzongkhag and Gewog and Thromde Tshogdes (city council) have a critical role in determination of national priorities.

Bhutan had the first experience of holding elections in 2007-2008 and 2010-2011under the provisions of the Constitution. In the 2008 Bhutan had its first election to the 47-member National Assembly, the lower house, where the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa won by majority leaving only two-member in the opposition. The oppositional People's Democratic Party (PDP) storms to power after winning 32 seats out of 47 in nation's second parliamentary elections in 2013. The ruling PDP government has promised in election campaign to initiate Gewog Development Grant. Fulfilling the promise to empower the local government by giving more administrative and financial decision-making powers the government has initiated an annual grant of Nu 2 million for every gewog centre. The government is also in process of providing a utility pick-up truck to every gewog. The new LG will receive the vehicles after they take their office amid criticism from the opposition party and public.

With the next general election just couple of years away, the opposition party feels that distribution of the utility vehicles is a 'mindless populist' move by the government. Some of the LG members, elected this week, were former members of the political parties and they could influence the next general elections.



A big challenge to the election administration is how to ensure that the local governments do not get entrenched with political party activists as many former party members now occupy the local government positions. Continuous efforts should be made to inform and educate the electorate on the electoral system and the democracy in order to keep the LG posts apolitical.

## Biography of the author:



Rabi C Dahal is currently the Managing Editor at Bhutan Observer. He is a board of director for Journalists' Association of Bhutan. He heads the editorial board of Tashi Delek, Drukair's inflight magazine. All his journalistic working life has been spent with the Bhutan Observer, joining when the paper founded in 2006. He holds Master of Communication from Edith Cowen University,

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