
Translation

Role of Bhutanese Media in Democracy: Case Study of the 2013 General Election

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Bhutan, Monarchy, Democracy, Information Society, Media

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Abstract

The Kingdom of Bhutan, located in the Himalayas, closed its doors to foreign countries until the 1960s. After it reopened, Bhutan was a modern state for half a century. In 2008, the King of Bhutan decided to relinquish his power and democratize the country. It was an unprecedented event in history.

On the other hand, there was no mass media in this tiny country until the 1990s. In 1999, the King lifted the ban on information technology such as television and the Internet. It was a rare case where television broadcasting and Internet services commenced at the same time.

This study illustrates the history of democracy and the media in Bhutan and examines the correlation between them. Before commencing with such an examination, the theoretical stream of the relationship between democracy and the media in modern history should be reviewed.

The primary section of this paper comprises field research and analysis regarding the National Assembly election of Bhutan in 2013, as a case study of the practice of democracy. The research questions are as follows: 'What was the role of Bhutanese media in this election?'; 'What kind of information led Bhutanese voters to decision making?'

In conclusion, the theoretical model and the Bhutanese practical model of the relationship between the government, media, and citizens are compared. This comparison shows the progress of democracy and the role of the media in modern-day Bhutan.

1. Introduction

The Kingdom of Bhutan underwent the change from a monarchy to a parliamentary democracy in 2008. Surprisingly, it was led by the King himself, the ruler. The first parliament finished its term in 2013. The second general election, held in the same year, was 'the first election by evaluating the democratic government'.

Generally, the mass media plays an important role in elections. However, there was no such experienced media in Bhutan when the first and second general elections were held. Television broadcasting services only started in 1999, and radio broadcasting services and newspapers were privatized in 1992. Internet services also started in 1999. This means that internet media was present in the country before democracy. Thus, Bhutan does not need to care about the restriction of online election campaigns.

In 1999, the fourth King declared the introduction of television and Internet during an address to the nation at the silver jubilee celebration of his enthronement. His Majesty said, 'I trust that you will exercise your good sense and judgment in using the Internet and television' in considering both the positive and negative impact they would have on Bhutanese society¹. This address shows that the introduction of media and ICT in Bhutan was part of the preparation process for democratisation in the near future. Media and ICT literacy is considered to be a fundamental skill of citizens of a democratic country.

This study does not aim to discuss whether the process of social reform in Bhutan was right or wrong, nor to evaluate whether the election system or information and communication policy was good or bad. The purpose of this study is to

determine the present situation of media and democracy in Bhutan through a case study of a general election, the most practical scene of the dynamics between media and politics.

The methodologies are as follows. First, previous research on the relation between democracy and the media in modern and postmodern politics is reviewed. Second, the modern history of democracy and the media in Bhutan is examined via primary and secondary sources. The history could describe that the democratisation process was signposted by the penetration and privatization of the media and ICT by the Bhutanese government. Third, through a case study of the general election in 2013, the 'role of the mass media in the election' and the 'information gathering and decision making of voters' are revealed with consideration of the effect that the election period and the transition issue had on the media.

Finally, the present situation of democracy and the media in Bhutan is determined as a correlation between the government, media, and citizens through a comparison between the theoretical model of modern democracy and the practical model of Bhutanese democracy.

2. Relation between Democracy and Media

2.1. Modern Democracy and Mass Media

What are the required conditions for modern representative democracy? Dahl (1998) suggested six political institutions as follows: 'elected officials', 'free, fair, frequent elections', 'freedom of expression', 'access to alternative sources of information', 'associational autonomy', and 'inclusive citizenship'. In terms of the media and information, 'freedom of expression' and 'access to alternative sources of information' are

important, and the former was defined as 'a right to express themselves without the danger of severe punishment', and the latter as 'a right to seek out alternative sources of information' by Dahl.

A strong relationship between democracy and the media, especially between modern democracy and mass media, is considered to be a known fact. The 'Democracy Index'² measures the state of democracy in each country, and the 'Press Freedom Index'³ measures the degree of freedom in each country; the two show a high correlation coefficient⁴. It is no wonder there is a strong relation between the 'Democracy Index' and the 'Press Freedom Index', because both surveys include common questions related to 'freedom of expression' and 'access to alternative sources of information'.

However, Herman and Chomsky (1988) warned about the deep ties between the media and democracy. Their 'propaganda model' explains that private media has not played the role of a watchdog of political power, due to their tendency to sell their products (readers and audiences) to consumers (advertisers) rather than pursuing and delivering quality news to the public. Especially in the United States, they classified five types of news filters into 'ownership', 'advertising', 'sourcing', 'flak', and 'anti-communism and fear'.

Incidentally, with the progress of new sources of information technology, the movement to seek out alternative forms of modern democracy is spreading all over the world. Sunstein (2001) noted that an institution of 'freedom of expression' was no longer monopolized by mass media after the penetration of the Internet. From the perspective of human history, mass media is still a new player in our industrial society, and it

should not be considered as a necessity.

Meanwhile, Cardon (2010) valued the role of the Internet as an institution of 'access to alternative sources of information'. He mentioned that the Internet contributed to the widespread distribution of valuable information defended by technical, legal, institutional, and commercial breakwaters, and that this alternative source of information enabled the widening of the space for political criticism. However, he also suspected the unfairness of the Internet. Active citizens can enjoy democracy, while silent and isolated citizens are in danger of losing their rights and power.

2.2. Postmodern Media and Democracy 2.0

In the early 2010s, the 'Arab Spring' and the 'online election campaign' were key topics relating to new movements of democracy in the postmodern era.

The democratisation movement in Arab countries, the so-called 'Arab Spring' which attracted the world's attention, started from the 'Jasmine Revolution' in Tunisia. Since 1987, Tunisia had realised miraculous economic growth by achieving an average economic growth rate of 5 to 6% over 20 years under the Ben Ali regime. However, there were shadows of dictatorship, including high unemployment rates, political corruption, and information censorship. Tunisia was ranked 164th among 178 countries in the 'Press Freedom Index' before the revolution and criticized as 'Enemies of the Internet'.

The Ben Ali regime, which had controlled 'freedom of expression' through strong censorship, could not stop the wave of the revolution that dominated public opinion not only in Tunisia but also in foreign countries through social media such as Facebook, triggered by a

young Tunisian's suicide in December 2010. The president, Ben Ali, escaped the country and the government was overwhelmed in one month. While some media theorists have called this revolution a 'social media revolution', others persisted in scepticism and argued that we should not simplify it and view it as a technology-driven revolution⁵. Regardless, it should be noted that a dictator cannot stop democratisation movements by dominating mass media as an institution of political propaganda in the 21st century.

Another case on lifting the ban on 'online election campaigns' was brought forward in Japan in 2013. In the previous Japanese election act, only offline documents and drawings such as posters and flyers were available for election campaigns, and the use of the Internet had been severely restricted. Compared to the Japanese situation, cyberspace has become one of the main battlefields of election campaigns in the United States since the 1990s, and in South Korea since the early 2000s. Even in Japan, the possibility of an 'online election campaign' had been discussed intermittently since the late 1990s, and finally, in April 2013, the election act was revised. In July 2013, the election of the House of Councillors, the first national election after the lifting of the ban, was carried out.

Japanese media theorists considered this political situation as not only adjusting the institution to the latest technology, but also reforming democracy itself. According to Azuma (2011), the penetration of ubiquitous computing and social media has created a completely new governance system called 'democracy 2.0'; Tsuda (2012) sympathised with his idea. Nishida (2013) stated that the series of struggles until the lifting of the ban was a conflict between 'homogeneous fairness', required in the previous Japanese

election act, and 'progressive improvement', the technological nature of the Internet. He also explained that the ideology of modern democracy had to be reconsidered in the era of the Internet.

Of course, in terms of today's media ecosystem, the Internet era does not mean the occupation of media space by the Internet after the end of mass media domination. Endo (2011) noted that the emergence of new media formed simultaneous, parallel, or multi-layered communication spaces. Old media has never been expelled, and the interaction between various forms of media constitute a so-called 'intermedia society'. She also argues that the interaction between press coverage, public opinion, and politics was actualized especially during election periods.

The concept of an 'intermedia society' is linked to the argument by Cardon (2010) about the effect of the anonymity brought about by the early stages of the Internet and the effect of the return to real name brought about by social media. He stated that the early Internet recommended anonymity which had been eliminated in traditional public spaces, and cyberspace accepted first person talking, dogmatic points of view, freewheeling remarks, obscure remarks, poetic messages, and emotional opinions. Social media, regarded as the driver of the dual revolution, broadened the rights of open debate in public and absorbed private conversation into the public sphere.

3. Modern History of Democracy and Media in Bhutan

3.1. History of Democracy

In this section, the history of democracy and media in Bhutan will be outlined. It is noted that the King himself politically promoted the transfer

of power to the people and the creation of the institutes of 'freedom of expression' and 'access to alternative sources of information'.

The Kingdom of Bhutan, with a population of around 0.7 million, is located on the southern slope of the Himalayas, surrounded by steep mountains. After the establishment of the modern dynasty in 1907, Bhutan had been considered to be a substantially isolated country for half a century. This tiny country is placed in a difficult geopolitical position due to being sandwiched between two giants, China in the north and India in the south.

A step toward democratisation began with the reign of the third King, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (Reign 1952–1972). In 1953, the ruler established the National Assembly (old)⁶ and delegated a part of his own legislative authority. However, according to Rose (1977), the King still had an absolute veto and had the right to make the final decision in all legislative enactments. In 1968, the King abandoned this veto and final decision right.

Members of the National Assembly (old) consisted of bureaucrats, monks, and national representatives. In terms of national representatives, the way elections worked was quite different from today's democratic election system. Rose (1977) revealed that they were elected by a consensus based on tradition. When a consensus could not be reached, another method, such as throwing dice, was adopted.

In addition, in 1968, the Royal Advisory Council was established and the ruler's administrative authority was delegated. As the King still had the right to appoint ministers, his power was not reduced substantially. However, appointed ministers certainly played an important role in the administration as the heads of each ministry (Rose, 1977).

The fourth King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck (Reign 1972–2006), was crowned at the age of only 17 in 1972 due to the sudden death of his father, the third King. He followed his father's way of governance, both in terms of diplomacy and domestic affairs. Contrary to his father, he decided to take an extremely cautious attitude towards democratisation. For a young and inexperienced King, to let go of his own sovereignty at an early age meant that he risked losing control of the Kingdom.

In 1998, when the King was confident that he had a firm foothold, he gave the National Assembly (old) the allowance for the impeachment of the King, and he decided to appoint ministers as a result of a confidence voting system by the parliament. The authority of the National Assembly (old) was strengthened, and the nation steadily progressed towards democratisation. In 2005, the fourth King declared that the constitution would be enacted within three years, and that the Kingdom would shift from a constitutional monarchy to a parliamentary democracy. In the following year, the fifth King, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, succeeded to his father's throne after the fourth King believed in the birth of a democratic nation. The fifth and present King called himself 'the King to serve the people', and he has worked toward achieving a true democratic state.

In 2008, under the constitution which was promulgated for the first time in history, a general election of the new National Assembly took place. Political parties, Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP), were organized, and they contested the first election. DPT won 45 seats out of 47.

Democratisation in Bhutan led by the King was

realized through a very different process from the civil revolutions that are part of modern Western history, or the ‘Arab Spring’ mentioned earlier. A very strange sentence, ‘democratization refused by the people’, shows its specificity. The fourth King travelled all over the country, as the finishing touch of democratisation, to preach to the people about the benefits of democracy and the dangers of a dictatorial monarchy. There are anecdotes that some villagers begged the King to rule by his intelligence, while others cried and appealed for him to stop the process and finish his reign.

The fourth King made many excellent political decisions over a long period of time and had garnered tremendous trust and respect from the people. However, ironically, it is undeniable that such great works had prevented the people from fostering an awareness of political participation.

Table 1. Modern History

Year	Event (<i>oblique type</i> occurred in neighbouring country)
1907	<u>Modern monarchy started</u>
1947	<i>Independence of India</i>
1952	Third King enthroned
1953	<u>National Assembly (old) established</u>
1959	<i>Tibet annexed by China</i>
1961	Modernization (First Five Year Plan) started
1962	<i>Sino-Indian border conflict</i>
1968	<u>Royal advisory council established</u>
1972	Fourth King enthroned
1975	<i>Sikkim annexed by India</i>
1998	Allowance for the impeachment of the King
1999	TV broadcasting and Internet services started
2006	Fifth King enthroned
2008	<u>Representative democracy started.</u> First general election, <i>Nepal switched from monarchy to democracy</i>
2013	Second general election

3.2. History of the Media and ICT

First, the Royal Government of Bhutan had been cautious about the negative impact that the media and ICT may have on Bhutanese society. Currently, a national development project in Bhutan relies on the development philosophy ‘GNH (Gross National Happiness)’, advocated by the fourth King in the 1970s. Bhutan noticed that economic benefits through technological modernisation had harmed the natural environment and traditional culture in many developed countries. Thus, ‘GNH’ emphasized psychological well-being as the most important factor. However, as ‘GNH’ received high praise and Bhutan increased its presence internationally, ironically, the country was urged to open its nation to the media and ICT.

In 1967, Kuensel newspaper, Bhutan’s first newspaper, began as a government gazette publishing articles on national development projects (Five Year Plan). Kuensel became independent and became Bhutan’s first newspaper corporation in 1986. Radio services were launched in 1973 by a private volunteer organization called the National Youth Association of Bhutan. In 1979, it was decided that it should be under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Communication as a public service. Next, the Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS) was established as a public corporation responsible for the radio broadcasting business in 1986.

In 1992, by edict of the fourth King, both Kuensel and BBS were privatized. Since then, the businesses of both companies have gradually expanded, such as weekly newspaper publications and the expansion of radio broadcasting times. They steadily grew from small media into national media. Even after privatization, a large subsidy by

the government was (and still is) provided to both companies⁷.

Until the 1990s, the Bhutanese media, a tiny newspaper editorial office and radio station, did not have the function of mass communication and public opinion. According to Wangchuk (2007), 'It can, therefore, be concluded that the growth of media has been in consonance with the socio-economic development of the country.' The initial role of the media in Bhutan was to help the government spread statements of development. Its nature was also quite different from the mass media found in other countries.

In 1999, the ban on television and the Internet was lifted, and Bhutan stepped into the information age. In terms of television broadcasting, the BBS played the same role as radio services. Since television was introduced, it became possible to watch foreign channels including those from India via the cable television system. This means that Bhutan opened its doors to the world. Meanwhile, with regard to the Internet, in the early 2000s, expensive usage fees delayed the spread of this service, especially in the private sector. The use of the Internet remained only for public use such as government agencies and educational institutions.

From the end of 2003 to 2004, mobile phone service by Bhutan Telecom Ltd. began, and the spread of mobile phones started. Mobile phones were introduced to each household as a substitute for the fixed lines that had not made much progress. As mentioned, Bhutan is a mountainous country; thus, the cost of installing and maintaining mobile phones was cheaper than fixed line services. Since around 2010, when mobile Internet access became possible, the Internet penetration rate to the private sector has risen rapidly. As of the end of 2014, the penetration

rate of mobile phones reached 86.3% and the Internet penetration rate reached 46.9% (Figure 1).

Regarding mobile phones, the penetration rates are not directly proportional to the number of users, considering the unique situation of Bhutan. For example, mobile phones became popular as a household telephone instead of fixed lines at the beginning of the service. Similarly, Internet penetration rates do not include users who access the internet from workplaces or schools.

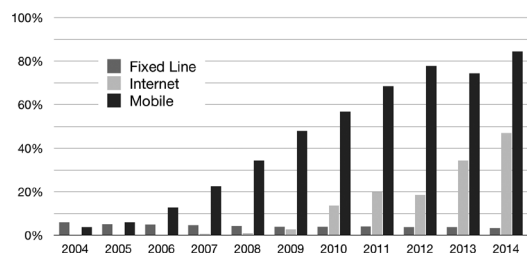


Figure 1. Transition of ICT Penetration Ratio⁸

Incidentally, until the early 2000s, Bhutanese media had been monopolized by Kuensel paper and BBS broadcasting. In 2006, in order to improve this situation, the government started to accept the entry of media services by the private sector. As of March 2014, 12 newspapers and seven radio stations were in service. Thus far, no private television station has been established. In terms of social media, there is no service solely targeting Bhutan. Many people use global media, especially Facebook. As of December 2011, the number of users reached 80,220, reaching 11.46% of the population and 81.25% of Internet users at that time⁹.

The biggest characteristic of Bhutan's media and ICT is that every service has been promoted as a national policy. In Bhutan, 60% of people still engage in agriculture even in the 21st century.

Thus, the industry is weak and the market is extremely small. Therefore, it is extremely difficult for the domestic media and ICT-related companies to earn a profit through advertising and subscription income. Inevitably, the government had to lead such services as national projects. Since 2006, private enterprises have been struggling to secure revenue sources, and some companies have already abandoned their services.

Currently, the communication media environment of Bhutan is forming an ‘intermedia society’ (Endo, 2014) centred on newspapers, television (radio), and the Internet (Figure 2). The following case study analysis is based on this figure.

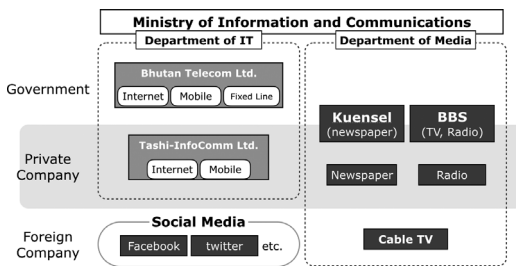


Figure 2. Structure of Media and ICT

4. Case Study: General Election in 2013

4.1. Election System

This section includes a case study of the 2013 general election. First, the characteristics of the election system of Bhutan as stipulated by the constitution promulgated in 2008 are described below.

Voting rights are granted to those who are 18 years of age or older, possess Bhutanese nationality, and have lived in the electoral district for at least one year. Moreover, it is clearly stated in the constitution that the royal family and

religious officials are not given the right to vote. Candidates for parliament must be between the ages of 25 and 65, and are required to hold a university degree. Spouses of non-Bhutanese people, civil servants, and corporate officials are not eligible for election. Regarding the constraint that candidates must hold a degree, it was criticized as unacceptable and as a violation of human rights in a report by the election observation team dispatched during the 2008 election¹⁰.

In the parliament, the National Council is equivalent to the Upper House, and the National Assembly is equivalent to the Lower House. The term of office is five years. Twenty of the 25 members of the National Council are elected as regional representatives selected from all 20 Dzongkhags (prefectures), and the remaining five are directly nominated by the King. It is unique that the King maintains a portion of the legislative power. While National Council members are prohibited from belonging to political parties, National Assembly members are obliged to do so. In the National Assembly elections, if more than three parties run, two parties are elected in the preliminary round. After that, during the final round, 47 members in total are elected from each of the 47 small constituency districts nationwide. Next, the Prime Minister is appointed from the National Assembly members and the cabinet is organized.

In terms of adopting a parliamentary cabinet system and small constituency system together, it can be said that it is an orthodox modern democracy system following the example of the UK. However, it is a significant feature that the constitution stipulates that the two major political parties are elected intentionally. Morohashi (2013) points out that ‘there is no similar case in

other countries that the number of parties in the parliament is specified preliminarily’.

Dahl (1998) noted that there is no such system that completely satisfies the criteria for an electoral system. Thus, Bhutan’s election system also has several problems. The most severe point is the inconsistency problem between the percentage of votes and the number of seats. Mr. Kunzang Wangdi, Secretary of the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB), emphasised that all Dzongkhags had to be equal to dispatch at least two representative each under the constitution. He added that ‘As the first step in practicing democracy, the Royal Government of Bhutan adopted the electoral system including two major political parties and the small constituency’, and pointed out the possibility of changing the system in the future.¹¹

4.2. Story of the Election Period

On 28 April 2013, the National Assembly dissolved, and the election campaign began. In this election, three new political parties, Bhutan Kuen-nyam Party (BKP), Druk Chirwang Tshogpa (DCT), and Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT), offered candidates in addition to the two former parties, DPT and PDP. The first conflict in the election campaign of each party started in the candidate selection stage. There was a blatant battle about matters such as offering a candidate for election who had been defeated in the National Council election on 23 April. Nonetheless, BKP was disqualified as it failed to meet the requirement to offer candidates in all constituencies before the deadline of the preliminary deputy application. The remaining four parties started their election campaigns for the preliminary round which was not implemented in the 2008 election. The voting

date for the preliminary round was 31 May 2013, and the final round took place on 13 July.

The main election campaigns of each party and each candidate were composed of open debates among candidates on the BBS television channel or BBS’s official YouTube channel, rallies by political parties, and door-to-door visit by candidates. There were no street speeches or electoral cars, which was a major battlefield in Japan. It means there were few opportunities to touch on information on the election in the street, other than by posting election posters.

In addition, election campaigns using the Internet which were rarely seen in the previous election were actively carried out (Table 2). All political parties had a website where they posted manifestos and other issues, and also placed official pages on Facebook to exchange opinions with voters. Three parties excluding DCT sent messages through twitter, and three parties apart

Table 2. Online Campaign Sites by Party

Party	Site	URL
DCT	WEB *	http://www.dct.bt
	Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/328003180616599
	Google+	https://plus.google.com/103629617522852902250
	YouTube	http://www.youtube.com/channel/UChYXG_Ys-GI_tgVtVdPDMKg
DNT	WEB	http://www.druknyamrup.info
	Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/353065868082048
	twitter	https://twitter.com/DrukNyamrup
	Google+	https://plus.google.com/112294546771569803074
	YouTube	http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCf1vdZ_HWP199-TcviTYarQ
DPT	WEB *	http://www.dpt.bt
	Facebook	http://www.facebook.com/241996135919197
	twitter	https://twitter.com/DrukDpt
	Google+	https://plus.google.com/112454403727788250621
PDP	WEB *	http://pdp.bt
	Facebook	https://www.facebook.com/bhutanpdp
	twitter	https://twitter.com/bhutanpdp

* Impossible to access on 31 March 2016.

from PDP acquired Google+ user accounts. Moreover, DCT and DNT had official YouTube channels. However, many of these online campaign sites were not being used. The utilization of social media for elections was still in a trial stage. As of 2013, Facebook was the main venue for online election campaigns in Bhutan. Of course, most Facebook users formed part of the younger generation, and the battle on Facebook was only one of the local battles being fought over the course of the entire campaign.

The results of the preliminary round (voter turnout: 55.3%) were as follows, and the top two parties advanced to the final round.

- ① DPT 93,949 votes (44.5%)
- ② PDP 68,650 votes (32.5%)
- ③ DNT 35,962 votes (17.0%)
- ④ DCT 12,457 votes (5.9%)

In the final round (voter turnout: 66.1%), PDP gained victory in 32 of the 47 small constituencies, securing more than two-thirds of the seats, although the voting rate was as follows.

- ① PDP 138,558 votes (54.9%)
- ② DPT 113,927 votes (45.1%)

It must be noted that the results of the preliminary and final elections are reversed. In the preliminary round, PDP only won in 12 constituencies. Surprisingly, they expanded their support in only one and a half months and achieved victories in 20 more constituencies.

In the next section, the reason why such a significant reversal had occurred will be explored by examining issues relating to the media during the election period.

4.3. Transition of Electoral Issues in the Media

In this section, articles from the six main newspapers (Kuensel, Bhutan Observer, The Bhutanese, Bhutan Today, Business Bhutan, and

Bhutan Times) related to the election from 1 June (the day after the preliminary round) to 13 July (the day of the final round) are examined. These articles show how the issue of elections has changed in mass media.

First, the issue of the first half of the election was about the problem of candidate replacement by PDP. PDP who came second after DPT in the preliminary round, took an unexpected measure towards achieving victory in the final round; namely, the replacement of candidates from each party who had lost in the preliminary round. In particular, DNT lost seven candidates including the party leader, and five of them won in the final round. Since many candidates who belonged to the losing party in the preliminary round accepted transfers to the other party, there was no sense of party loyalty. DPT accused PDP of injustice on this issue. However, when DPT was obliged to replace a candidate due to illegalities, they ceased their criticism.

In mid-June, the website '*Bhutanomics*' <<http://bhutanomics.com/>> which included acute criticism of the DPT regime, became the subject of conversation. Many Bhutanese shared this site on Facebook. DPT argued that the posts on the site had to be considered not only as criticism but also as being against the national interests, and DPT wanted to know the identity of the owner. However, The Bhutanese and other newspapers violently protested against this request for infringing on 'freedom of expression'. As a result, DPT had compromised its reputation in the campaign.

From the end of June to the beginning of July, a tremendous disturbance happened in relation to India. Bhutan had been strongly dependent on India, especially economically, as most of its fuel including gas and kerosene had been imported

from India. The fuel had also been supplied at low prices due to subsidies by the Indian government. When Indian newspapers reported that the Indian government decided to abolish this subsidy, Bhutanese papers immediately picked up on it. Fuel prices in Bhutan soared. Although DPT announced that the relationship between India and Bhutan was irrelevant in the election, it was a common view that the DPT regime's diplomatic failures caused the situation.

It can be said that all of these articles acted as a counterbalance against DPT. These issues in the mass media may have contributed to the voting reversal in the final round.

Mass media in the modern democratic state is required to play the role of widely notifying each citizen of the manifestos that are publicised by each party, and to present electoral issues to the However, in this election, even if there was a manifest introduced in the newspaper, it was never the primary issue. This is because Bhutanese mass media had no experience as a watchdog of power because of its short history. It could also be because the manifestos presented by the parties were very similar, and they never clarified why their policies were better than those of their rivals.

4.4. The Role of Mass Media in the Election

This section is based on unstructured interviews conducted with members of the Bhutanese media. The roles that mass media played in this campaign are expressed in this section. The interviewees were BBS and Kuensel, the major media players in Bhutan, and the Bhutan Observer as a representative of private media. In these interviews, the author made appointments in advance, visited the media companies in person, and conducted face-to-face

interviews.

First, I asked each company about the media's attitude toward the election. Mr. Ashok Moktan, general manager of BBS, said, 'Simply, we are reporting facts and live voices only. The influence of television media is significant, and we are also responsible for educating the audience.'¹² This shows that BBS still takes pride in their role as a form of national public media. Mr. Chencho Tshering, editor-in-chief of Kuensel newspaper, answered, 'Kuensel always maintain a neutral position and never reports anything biased. Bhutan is based on a small community, so we pay attention to balance.'¹³ His statements emphasised the media's position as a coordinator of the election. On the other hand, Mr. Needrup Zangpo, editor-in-chief of the Bhutan Observer newspaper, stated, 'We ask politicians about their political ideology and leadership. Since the Bhutan Observer is not a tabloid (gossip) paper, our articles only have reliable and serious topics.'¹⁴ Despite his insistence, a bitter caricature was posted as the main visual in almost every issue. It seems private media is pursuing popularity and topicality.

Next, I asked about the characteristics of this election campaign. Mr. Moktan of BBS mentioned the negative campaign between the candidates, and said, 'What candidates talk about in the media is up to them, and how to judge the contents is up to voters. The media cannot have the responsibility.' Similarly, Mr. Tshering of Kuensel responded, 'The media is quietly observing negative campaigns.' In either case, the Bhutanese media did not think that controlling negative campaigns was part of their responsibilities.

Finally, we talked about the relationship between the media and the ECB. Mr. Moktan of

BBS denied information control and said, 'Basically, election coverage acts in accordance with the ECB guidelines, but it does not mean the media is controlled by ECB.' According to Mr. Moktan, 'ECB, the media, and the political parties are monitoring each other.' In the opinion of Mr. Zangpo of the Bhutan Observer, 'The ECB guidelines include merely proclaiming the freedom, fairness, and transparency that every journalist should originally have.'

4.5. Information Gathering and the Decision Making of Voters

In this section, information sources and the voting behaviour of voters are described. From 11 to 14 July, excluding 13 July, the day of the final round of voting, semi-structured street interviews were conducted at five locations in the capital city Thimphu. Data on a total of 42 people with voting rights (62% male, 38% female, response rate 100%) was collected.

First, I asked about the news sources that respondents judged to be significant sources of information relating to the election. The details of the 39 active respondents were as follows: television = 27, newspapers = 15, and social media = 14 (including 0 respondent over the age of 30). 'I was able to know the pledges of political parties from television and newspapers, but I think we could debate constructively on social media' (by a 21-year-old man/student). Some voters used the right media at the right time.

Particularly effective sources of information were public debates on television or in person. Surprisingly, 38 out of the 40 active respondents watched or participated in public debates on more than one occasion. Many of them stated a favourable impression and said that they were satisfied with the public debates. One respondent

said, 'The candidates are not favourable because they use bad words' (by a 62-year-old man/security guard). Some voters were unhappy with the negative campaigns.

Next, I asked about voting behaviour and decision making. To the question of why they go to vote, the majority answered, 'to choose a better leader' or 'to organize a good government'. On the other hand, there were also some who said, 'Because it is the second chance in my life' (by a 54-year-old man/unemployed), and 'Democracy is a gift from the former King' (by a 63-year-old man/construction industry). These messages show the feeling of joy that is obtained from voting, and not one person was indifferent to politics as in Japan. However, responses such as 'I do not vote, because the monarchy before 2008 was good' (by a 27-year-old woman/sales business) were also recorded. These messages show that some Bhutanese still doubt the value of democracy.

5. Present Situation of Democracy and the Media

5.1. Analysis

In this section, the analysis of the case study illustrates the relationship between democracy and the media in Bhutan.

First, according to the press coverage during the election campaign and the role of the mass media gleaned through interviews, the function of Bhutanese mass media swayed between neutral and critical. As a result, the mass media became a mere bystander or aggressive participant when a negative campaign began. Therefore, it can hardly be said that the mass media had any constructive abilities. This is expected to improve in the future.

Meanwhile, the mass media was strongly conscious of the ideal role for ‘freedom of expression’ during the 2013 election campaign. Wangchuk (2007) noted that ‘freedom of expression’ had been rather severely restricted in the past, and he also stated as follows: ‘Not so much as state policies, but rather as personal considerations or individual decisions. Perhaps it is owing to the feudal past, or maybe it is because of the Bhutanese modesty and humility at work.’ After 2008, democracy changed such a situation, and the media had to try to adjust to its role in this new age.

Second, the political participation by voters is analysed. In this election, from the preliminary round to the final round, many voters vacillated between one party and another due to articles in the media. It is difficult to say that the political literacy of every citizen was established. This is attributable to the fact that the history of the media and ICT is still short, and it seems that only time will solve this problem.

On the other hand, the lack of understanding of democracy itself is more serious. Due to the country’s peaceful democratization, Bhutanese people were less aware of the transfer of sovereignty. They are indifferent to the idea of ideal citizens and citizenship (democratic rights of citizens) in modern democratic countries. Initially, there was no premise that democracy was good. It is quite natural for the sense of nostalgia for the monarchy to become stronger when the democratized government loses control of governance.

5.2. The Government, Media, and Citizens

We are once again reminded of the six institutions of modern democracy mentioned by Dahl (1998). The balanced structure of the

government, the media, and citizens should be considered as the stable model of modern democracy. The government and citizens are connected by four institutions of ‘elected officials’, ‘free, fair, frequent elections’, ‘associational autonomy’, and ‘inclusive citizenship’. In short, ‘citizenship’ directly links the government and its citizens. Meanwhile, the media becomes ‘access to alternative sources of information’ for citizens, and the media can be granted ‘freedom of expression’ from the government. Both the government and citizens are indirectly linked through the media as a mediator. The cyclic feedback structure by these three agents can be defined as the Theoretical Model of Modern Democracy (Figure 3).

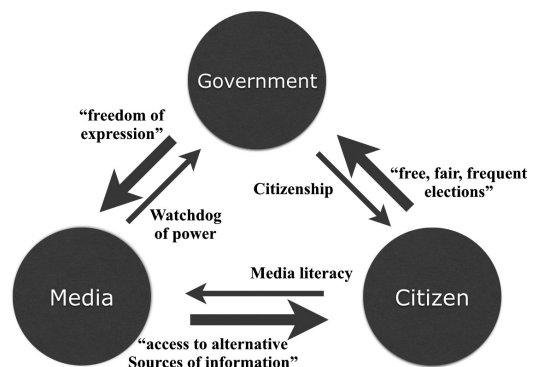


Figure 3. Theoretical Model of Modern Democracy

In Bhutan, both the media and democracy have rapidly developed, and were ‘given by the King’. As the analysis in the previous section shows, the newborn democratic government, media, and citizens are engaged in an extremely unstable balance. The current structure is drawn based on binomial relations as follows.

First, both the government and media were trying to remain faithful to the law. The government regulated the media through the

ECB and demanded that they remain neutral towards each party. The mass media maintained the principle of ‘freedom of expression’ and was strongly aware of fact-based reporting. However, the mass media was too conscious of neutrality. Thus, there was also a risk of becoming a passive bystander. In addition, among the mass media, BBS and Kuensel had been subsidised by the government, so they still maintained all the characteristics of state-run media.

In Bhutan, by law, there is little distinction between mass media and social media. In fact, surveillance of social media is almost impossible. In the future, if the mass media gains more neutrality, there is also the possibility that social media will replace government monitoring functions. However, criticism against the government was noticeable in past postings, both in the mass media and on social media. Many critical caricatures appeared as the top article in newspapers. Conversely, there were few constructive commentaries to evaluate the performance of the current government.

Second, let us examine the relationship between citizens and the government. Among citizens, there is scepticism towards democracy, and a dependence on the King. Many citizens still believe that the King will save the country in the event of a governmental crisis. Voting behaviour was based on the idea that the opposition party who had not yet taken control could be given the chance. Thus, it is difficult to say that voters’ choices were the results of deep reflection and examination.

Third, the King, the father of media and democracy in Bhutan, is still attractive to citizens. Constitutionally, the King still has legislative and judiciary power, such as the right to nominate five members of the National Council, the

Supreme Court chief, and the ECB chairperson. However, the right to impeach the King, which was granted to the National Assembly (old) in 1998, has been transferred to the present National Assembly. This means that the government can exert a certain amount of influence on the invincible royal power of the King. The Bhutanese royal family is completely different from the royal family in the UK or the imperial family in Japan, which are ‘symbolised’ and clearly excluded from the power games of politics.

Finally, in terms of the relationship between the media and citizens, the media was unable to provide useful information to help citizens make decisions, and citizens could hardly distinguish helpful information from tremendous news in the media. As Fujiwara (2012) pointed out, because of the lack of an industrial market in Bhutan, ‘productive information’ had never been thought to be useful. For citizens, the media is a source of ‘consuming information’ such as entertainment programs. In addition, since the mass media and social media started simultaneously, many citizens had not considered the mass media as a reliable source of information.

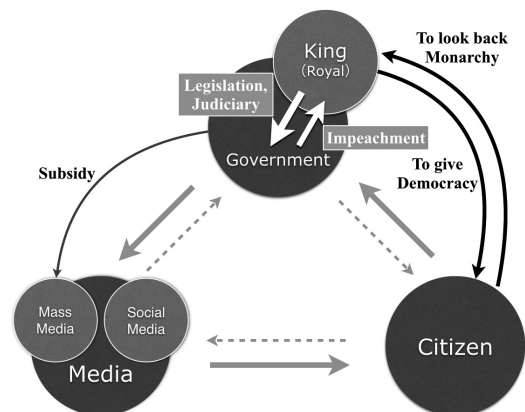


Figure 4. Practical Model of Bhutanese Democracy

The Practical Model of Bhutanese Democracy is shown in Figure 4. The government has problems with the unique democratic system, including the King. The media also has difficulties with economic vulnerability, and citizens are troubled by information literacy.

6. Conclusion

In the 21st century, Bhutan adopted the classical modern democratic system consisting of two major political parties. By mimicking the way that many modern democratic states had traversed democracy, the political system was carefully evaluated regarding whether it could be adapted to modern society in Bhutan. Democracy in Bhutan is currently in a magnificent and practical learning phase.

On the other hand, as mentioned above, the binary relationship between modern democracy and mass media is considered to be a relic of the 20th century, and the social systems in many countries will be drastically reformed. In Bhutan, modern democracy and the mass media were introduced at the same time as cable television and social media in the early 21st century. This study describes in detail a kind of chaos that no other country has experienced. However, the future prediction of Bhutanese democracy and the media is never deliberated.

In addition, two important factors that were not mentioned enough in this paper should be pointed out. The first is Bhutan's relationship with neighbouring India, and the second is the political aspect of Buddhism.

First, India's halt of the subsidy for fuel exports was one of the major issues at the end of the election campaign. This showed that politics in Bhutan could not stand alone without diplomatic

relations, especially its relationship with India. Bhutan's economic dependence on India allows for political influence by India. This is an extremely serious situation for any sovereign state. From now on, Bhutan must seriously aim for economic independence.

In modern democracies, religion and politics are separate. Even in the constitution of Bhutan, religious officials are restricted from having political power. However, in the past, Buddhist priests retained a certain amount of authority, such as being given seats in the National Assembly (old). Even today, after Bhutan became a democratic state, the relationship between religion and politics should be taken into account.

According to Dorji (2007), 'Our scholars now remind us of the centuries-old media that we had in Bhutan; the *mani* walls, prayer flags, the festivals and dances. This concept gives us a new depth of values to draw on as we develop the Bhutanese media today.' His statement suggests that Buddhist media is still part of Bhutanese 'intermedia society'.

The Buddhist faith and respect for the royal family is a social norm for Bhutanese people. If religious and royal power are removed from politics too rapidly through the introduction of modern democracy, the government will lose control. In Bhutan, another democratic system should be built, one that accepts traditional influences. When tradition, democracy, and the media are merged, Bhutan can jump from one of the last countries to have adopted modern democracy, to one of the latest countries to have reached another iteration of democracy.

Footnotes

1. Source: Bhutan Times, ed. (2007) "Immortal Lines: Speeches of the fourth Druk Gyalpo

- Jigme Singye Wangchuck”, p. 162.
2. Biannual ranking published by the Economist Intelligence Unit.
 3. Annual ranking published by Reporters Without Borders.
 4. In terms of 167 common countries in the ‘Democracy Index 2013’ and the ‘Press Freedom Index 2014’, the correlation coefficient between the two indexes is -0.753.
 5. According to Endo (2014), scepticism is based on ‘the low rate of Internet usage’ or ‘the fear of neglecting various powers (politics, military, religion, economics, and so on)’.
 6. To avoid confusion, the ‘National Assembly’ before democracy is called the ‘National Assembly (old)’ in this paper.
 7. According to the ‘BBS Annual Report 2011’, a subsidy by the Royal Government of Bhutan accounts for 159 million Ngultrums, 58% of its gross income. On the other hand, its business income accounts for only 33 million Ngultrums.
 8. Source: Ministry of Information and Communications, Royal Government of Bhutan, ed. (2015) “Annual InfoComm and Transport Statistical Bulletin (6th edition, 9th March 2015)”, p. 9-14.
 9. Source: Social Bakers: Facebook Statistics. <<http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/bhutan/>>, accessed 16 December 2012.
 10. Source: European Union Election Observation Mission, ed. (2008) “Bhutan Final Report: National Assembly Elections”, p. 8.
 11. Source: interview by the author at the office of ECB in 15 July 2013.
 12. Source: interview by the author at the office of BBS in 10 July 2013.
 13. Source: interview by the author at the office of Kuensel in 11 July 2013.

14. Source: interview by the author at the office of Bhutan Observer in 12 July 2013.

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