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Political Participation

Background

With the introduction of Democracy to secure the long term interest and wellbeing of the Nation and People, historic changes have taken place in our Nation's system of governance. It is critical that procedures for active participation, particularly related to the Political Party, are established firmly in line with the principles and provisions envisaged in the *Tsathrim Chhenmo of the Kingdom of Bhutan*.

The Second Parliamentary Elections in 2013 reaffirmed our concerns that at certain events during election campaigning, many people referred to themselves as *Tshogpas* (some paid by Political Parties as campaigners, and others purely on voluntary basis), often indulged in activities divisive in nature and thereby, adversely affecting social harmony. Their active presence at the grass-roots level, in the election period, in the communities with every person being known or referred to as a *Tshogpa* confused people with the *Tshogpas* of the *Gewog Tshogdes* who are elected representatives in Local Governments (LG).

In some villages, it has been said that every voter was a *Tshogpa* for one or other Political Party. While the number of persons designated as *Godenpa*, *Leyjepa* or *Jabchorpa* got curtailed drastically as was intended through policy implementation, the number of so-called *Tshogpas* proliferated, despite all efforts to require permits and implementation of ID card system for members of Political Parties engaging in election campaigns.

In their eagerness to please top Party functionaries, the so-called *Tshogpas* were reportedly trying to influence or convert as many people as possible in respective communities to support the Party they were associated with, even to the extent of resorting to unprincipled means detrimental to the very purpose of Democracy.

While Party Coordinators, Workers or Supporters are prerequisites of Political Parties, vital for a healthy democracy, it is felt imperative that, in the larger interest of a thriving democracy, peace and harmony in the society, particular effort needs to be made to address the potential threat created by these so-called *Tshogpas* who are inclined to cause chaos and discord in the communities for short term political gains based on vested interests.

The majority of the Voters are expected to remain independent of a political party exercising their preference of a Party only during an election.

Purpose and Function of Political Party

Political Parties constitute an essential component of a representative democracy as a means to provide cohesion and coherence to varying political views and aspirations.

The aim and purpose of any Political Party is the fulfillment of the aspirations of its electorate by providing responsible and efficient governance and leadership.

The Political Parties and Candidates, having pledged to serve the people, are actually one of the channels through which voters exercise their will and have a say in the governance of the society.

Legal Provisions

As per the provisions of the Constitution and the Electoral Laws, representation in the National Assembly of Parliament of Bhutan is only through two Political Parties chosen by the electorate through the Primary Round and the General Elections.

A Political Party enjoys the right and privileges of a Political Party under the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan upon being duly registered.

The Political Party system, as envisaged and provided under the Laws include broad-based Political Parties, interpreted as having cross-national membership and support in all the Dzongkhags and the National Assembly *Demkhongs* with a Party pledging full commitment to national cohesion, stability, advancement of democracy, social, cultural, political and economic growth of the Nation.

Ideal Organization of a Political Party

A Political Party is required to have a well-defined Party Structure as outlined in its Charter and as per the provisions of the Electoral Laws.

A functional Party must have at least a reasonable representation in the size of membership presence and organizational structure, both at central and field levels to ensure the convenience of voters as well as of its members at *Dzongkhag*, *Demkhong* and *Gewog* levels. This will ensure that the essential linkage between electorate and the Parties is not confined to an election period but is maintained and grows from one election to the next.

All intra-party actions should be in adherence to the principles of democratic practices, a common denominator for all registered Parties in the Kingdom.

Role of Political Parties in National Development

Political Parties have the important role of setting the agenda for policies and bringing about overall development in the country by providing accountable and responsive governance through effective policy and legislative solutions.

A Political Party that is well organized and has a capable system will be able to gain and maintain the trust and respect of the electorate and succeed in attracting members and nurturing competent and visionary leaders.

Political Parties and Candidates in a Parliamentary Democracy, having received the mandate from the people to govern the country or be in the Opposition or ~~being~~

even if not represented in Parliament, Parties have the mandate of highlighting alternative policies as the Voices of the people.

They aggregate and articulate the needs and problems faced by the communities and the Nation, balancing contrasting demands and converting them into public policies and programmes.

Both the Parties in Parliament have the moral duty and responsibility to actively support their MPs in the National Assembly. At the same time they must also work on strategies for future elections and carry out activities that are necessary to sustain the support, interest and respect of the voters and Party Supporters.

Members of Political Parties, in or out of Parliament, must be fully cognizant of the fact that their election manifestoes, if and when elected, manifest as national policies and five year plans.

The Ruling Party has to ensure that it is fully in operation supporting its leaders in Parliament and the Government by offering policy alternatives, feedback on key decisions of the Government and lobbying for general support on issues of both national and local concerns.

The Opposition Party has the duty to be in operation and provide effective shadow government role in compelling the Ruling Party to fulfill the aspirations of the people and serve the Nation.

The five Registered Political Parties as the representative of hopes and aspirations of the entire Bhutanese population should, continue to function in coherent manner and as per the responsibilities enshrined in the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan whether or not they are represented in Parliament, providing the best choices based on the values and aspirations of the people.

Registered Political Parties though not in Parliament should, nevertheless, be in operation and contribute in assessing public opinions regarding pertinent local and national issues that are under debate or provide feedback on any concern that needs to be addressed by Parliament and the Government in the public interest.

Every Political Party has the responsibility to its members, voters and society which must be fulfilled.

Political Party Functionaries

The Local Structure of Party Offices may vary from party to party depending on the strategy of a Party or perceived advantage of its support or disapproval in a *Demkhong* as well as mandates spelt out in the Party Rules.

Party Functionaries at the grass-roots level, to be referred as—“*Leyjepa*” or “*Jabchorpa*”, should ideally serve as a link between the electorate and the groups registered as Political Parties. As per the design of our democratic set-up or polity, these *Leyjepas* should serve as the means of organizing voters to support particular Political Party, ideology, manifesto or party Leadership, that resonates with an individual voter’s aspirations, hopes and beliefs.

Therefore, effective performance of party functionaries at the local level is important element of a representative democracy and electoral participation by individual voters.

Regulations

The *Political Party Rules of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 2012*, under Section 7.7 provides a reasonable regulation as appended below:

A Political Party shall not appoint more than:

1. One member as the Coordinator for each Dzongkhag;

2. One member as the Coordinator for each National Assembly *Demkhong*;
3. One member as the Coordinator for each Gewog; and
4. One member as the Coordinator for each Chiwog.

The Election Commission of Bhutan issued Notification too, vide No.: ECB/CEC-Notif/2013/4069 dated 10th of June 2013 that a Party Worker of a registered Political Party designated to carry out election campaign duties must be referred to as “*Leyjepa*” or “*Jabchorpa*” not “*Tshogpa*” in Dzongkha.

Within the above limitations a party can thus employ its members to carry out Party activities and electoral works.

Common Forums and Public Debates

During the Local Government Elections and the Second Parliamentary Elections the introduction of the Common Forums and the Public Debates had reduced the need for door-to-door campaigning both by the candidates and participates as well as the electors. Except by a few, for certain reasons best known to themselves, preferred to door to door campaigning.

With the utility of the Common Forums and Public debates, the door-to-door election campaign can be limited and more regulated in order to prevent any opportunity or role for the troublesome Party Workers **whilst not doing away with it altogether.**

Specific Lessons

As notified to the stakeholders, for the Bye-Election to Nanong Shumar *Demkhong*, it was made mandatory for a *Leyjepa* or supporter appointed by a Candidate or a Political Party to bear in person two identity cards, one issued by

the Party and the other by the Returning Officer, while conducting Election Campaigns.

Therefore, instead of free-for-all members of Parties conducting election campaigns, only 20 Party Workers each for the two Parties had been approved by the Returning Officer.

Similar regulations and strict implementation of dual ID cards can curtail lots of concerns related to ‘*Tshogpas*’ in future elections.

Further Actions

While it is useful that Parties have election campaigners at every level, unrestrained and unregulated number of workers have proven to be counterproductive. Such deployment be supervised by the Election authorities more incisively. Hence, based the feedback on the *Nanong_Shumar Bye-Election* and the **Learning from Exercise for the Second Parliamentary Elections 2013** the following needs to be considered:

- a. Common Forum to be taken further to *Chiwog* levels and more time allotted to Public Debates.
- b. Door-to-door election campaigns by so-called *Tshogpas* or representatives should be discouraged while Candidates may reach out to the electorate as per the campaign strategy within the framework of Electoral Laws;

- c. Specifically, Section 11.33 that restricts a Political Party or its Candidates or supporters to conduct door-to-door election campaigns after 8.00 p.m. should be amended to further broadened so that restriction is in place after 6.00 p.m.;
- d. Similarly, amendment shall be effected to delete Sub-Section 7.7.4 of the *Political Parties Rules of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 2012*, so that there shall not be possibility of Parties formally appointing a “member as the Coordinator for each Chiwog”;
- e. Election Representatives or *Leyjepas* appointed by a Candidate or a Political Party from among registered Members **of same constituency/demkhong**, shall be required to bear in person Identity Card issued by the Returning Officer, in an Election Period;
- f. The concerned Dzongkhag Electoral Offices should conduct routine review and submit monthly report on activities of the Party including membership status obtained from the Dzongkhag Coordinator’s Offices of the registered Political Parties;
- g. The Election Commission shall develop and conduct training Programmes for Political Parties, targeting members and *Leyjepas* their roles, functions, responsibilities and accountabilities.
- h. Awareness trainings under Civic Education Programmes to be rigorously pursued for other stakeholders at grassroots-level so that the situation of entire electorate in a village playing the role of ‘*Tshogpas*’ irrespective of one’s status as registered member of a Political Party or not is avoided;

- i. More intensive observation mechanism shall be adopted to deal with any unauthorized person carrying out election campaign activities promptly by election officers or election security on duty as per the Electoral Laws, so that there is no undesirable activity under the guise of political participation; and
- j. An effective mechanism for monitoring of the election campaign activities including application of funds shall be put in place during an election, subject to availability of adequate budgetary provision, particularly to cover activities and movement of each Candidate/Party.
