

Election Commission of Bhutan

Closing Remarks of the Chief Election Commissioner of Bhutan

Seminar on Lessons Learnt from the Study Tour to Denmark

by

Political Parties of Bhutan

25th of July 2014

Hon'ble Members of National Council of Bhutan,

Hon'ble Members of National Assembly of Bhutan,

Members of Political Parties,

Hon'ble Dignitaries,

Colleagues,

Friends,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. I believe all good things must come to an end in order for more good things to be ushered in!
2. I am glad that we had a very successful session and have covered many interesting issues of relevance to Party Politics and the ultimate wellbeing of the Nation.
3. We look forward to collaborating with all the five registered Political Parties, irrespective of electoral status and engage in meaningful activities to ensure a healthy democratic culture. In this regard, the ECB is happy in principle to endorse the establishment of *The Bhutan Democracy Dialogue*, (BDD).
4. BDD is, in essence, born out of the enthusiasm of the leadership of all 5 Parties to learn & work together towards ensuring success of the project activities for a healthy Democracy.
5. BDD will be guided by a Steering Committee (SC) in the Election Commission of Bhutan with two members from each of the registered Political Parties.
6. The BDD's Vision shall be a Bhutan with a mature democratic culture and vibrant democracy with well-functioning and responsible Political Parties and its Mission to promote a vibrant democracy in keeping with the will of the people through dialogue, cooperation and partnership amongst political parties as "Bhutanese First".

7. The objectives shall be to promote a culture of dialogue and cooperation among the parties in between elections and to build leadership capacity and skills of members of the political parties to strengthen and nurture the Bhutanese democracy.
8. We are proposing for the SC to be chaired by an Election Commissioner with the Secretary of the ECB who is also the Registrar of Political Parties as the Member-Secretary of the Committee and each Political Party shall be represented by two officials including the President/Vice President and General Secretary of a Party. Each Party shall serve as the Vice Chair of the SC on a rotation basis for a period of one year. The ECB shall budget the activities of the SC under the regular budget activities of the Commission. DIPD has already committed to support a project BDD as a follow up action to the study tour.
9. We have by now a fairly acceptable draft of a Concept Note which will be circulated for final comments to the Parties and thereafter the ECB and the five Registered Political Parties, as the Founding Signatories shall sign the BDD Charter on an auspicious *Zakar*.
10. We look forward to this occasion so that the Steering Committee could begin work thereafter on a Work Plan, synchronizing the capacity building and other activities proposed under Bhutan Democracy Dialogue with those incorporated under the ECB 11th FYP. This is why in this Seminar, ECB shared and presented its Strategic Plan along with the sharing of views by the Parties.

Insert any emerging issues from the seminar.

11. One important issue that the Parties have brought up in our earlier interaction is the engagement of Parties outside Parliament. In this regard, the Commission would earnestly request the Government and Parliament to place all registered Political Parties on their mailing and invitation lists for distribution of documents and for ensuring full participation in important public and national events and occasions.

12. We appreciate the engagement of the Parties as in the recent times but we feel that it would have been even more useful had it been possible for such views to be shared at the formulation stages rather than on retrospective or post-event scenario.

13. I would also like to take this opportunity to highlight some of the initiatives being undertaken by ECB as a means to broaden the approaches and foster participation of all sections of Bhutanese community in nurturing Democracy:

- i) First, Instituting *Democracy Clubs* in schools and tertiary institutes all over the country to function as mini election commissions educating youths on electoral processes right from school and assist us in registration of eligible upcoming young voters in the respective schools and nearby communities;
- ii) Second, initiation of the *Volunteer-VOICE* (Volunteer for Voter Information, Communication and Education) for interested Bhutanese to engage in carrying out voter and civic education. The Commission has already trained the first batch of youths and sent to various Gewogs and *Chiwogs* under Chhukha Dzongkhag to impart voter/civic education to the general public which was a successful initiative.
- iii) Third, establishment of the *NETWORK* (Network of Bhutanese for Electoral Democracy in Bhutan), which will ultimately grow into a think tank for electoral democracy where the interested individuals, intellectuals, politicians, academia, etc. are invited to share their ideas on improving and strengthening democracy;
- iv) Fourth, commitment to observe 15th of September, the International Democracy Day, as the National Voters' Day. ECB would further solicit participation by Parties and the general public through the national level programme of the ECB as well as at the Dzongkhags and in schools through the Democracy Clubs; and

- v) Fifth, a scientific research is being carried out nationwide currently, as resolved in the last FEMBoSA Meeting, to come up with measures to enhance women's participation in elective offices. The findings and recommendations shall be useful for all stake holders for information and planning necessary interventions.

14. Today as we meet under one roof, I would like to reiterate a few fundamental points that may be useful in guiding the Political Parties in the better discharge of their constitutional roles and responsibilities.

Role of Political Parties

15. All of us know very well that the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan provides that a registered Political Party of Bhutan has the sacred duty *inter-alia* to:

- (1) Ensure that national interest prevails over all other interests and provide choices based on the values and aspirations of the people for responsible and good governance;
- (2) Promote national unity and progressive economic development and strive to ensure the well-being of the Nation; and
- (3) Not resort to regionalism, ethnicity and religion to incite voters for electoral gain.

Role of Political Parties in National Development

16. With more than six years as a democracy, it has become generally and widely evident that Political Parties have the crucial role of setting the policy agenda and overall development in the country by providing accountable and responsive governance through effective policy and legislative solutions.

Organization of Political Party

17. A registered Political Party is required to ensure that it has a well-defined Party Structure and the intra-Party actions and decisions must be in adherence to the principle of democratic practices, a common denominator for all registered Parties in the Kingdom.

Socio-Economic Activities of Political Parties

18. It is a misnomer that role of a political party in the society is limited to only elections and if not elected to wait till the next one. A political organization, as I see it, has the occasion of birth but there should be no death as it ought to be a living organization that will have an active role in the society as a whole. A well-organized party can also play an equally useful role in supplementing and complementing the national efforts by funding and implementing socio-economic activities from the Party savings and surpluses.

Duty of the Political Parties to Good Governance

19. Political Parties and candidates in a Parliamentary democracy having received the mandate from the people to govern the country are the legitimate voices of the people. They aggregate and articulate the needs and problems being faced by the communities and the Nation. They balance contrasting demands and convert them into public policies and programmes. They make concerted efforts in order to shape public opinion while providing genuine choices to the people.
20. May I also emphasize that 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 the future elections and carry out activities that are necessary to sustain the support, interest and respect of the voters and Party Supporters.

There is, however, danger of Parliament becoming distracted and carrying out the duties of the other organs of the government and failing in the discharge of its own duties!

21. In the current context of the Bhutanese democracy, PDP, as the Ruling Party, has the responsibility to ensure that the Party Mechanisms are fully in operation to support its leaders in Parliament and 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.
22. Likewise the DPT, as the Opposition Party, has the duty to be in full operation and provide effective shadow government role in compelling the Ruling Party to fulfill the aspiration of the people and serve the Nation.
23. Equally, the Registered Political Parties not represented in Parliament are expected to be in operation. They must always be prepared to contest elections, as any time, the possibility of fresh elections or by-elections cannot be ruled out.
24. An active Political Party, whether in Parliament or not, could contribute in assessing public opinion regarding pertinent local or national issues that are under debate and provide feedback on any concern that needs to be addressed by Parliament and the Government in the public interest.

Expectations of the Election Commission

25. The ECB expects every Political Party to fulfill its responsibility to its members, voters and society both in and outside of Parliament.
26. We look forward to continued interaction with all Political Parties in contributing meaningfully towards further strengthening the Political Party system in Bhutan.

27. With this optimism, the Election Commission's Strategic Vision and the Eleventh Five Year Plan has kept provision for capacity building and strengthening of Political Parties and stakeholders, mindful at the same time of not undermining the character, ideology and independent thinking of each entity. The recent mood of the Parties is an encouraging one, thus, we shall rise to this opportunity and contribute through the following activities:

- (1) Conduct trainings and workshops for political parties and their *Leyjepas* in national and field offices to enhance organizational capacity of the Political Parties and their responsibilities outside of the elections, including the roles of the various levels of coordinators.
- (2) Conduct need based training for Political Parties under the MoU between ECI and ECB as Indo-Bhutan Joint Electoral Training Programme; and
- (3) Consult political parties, CSOs, general public and media on issues of general public interest to enhance confidence in the democratic processes.

28. As I said earlier, the ECB looks forward to engaging in meaningful operative activities with the Political Parties particularly as Political Parties cannot, under the Laws, receive any support other than from its registered members and all and any external cooperation and technical assistance to Political Parties in Bhutan should be through the ECB.

29. We have attempted to outline today the highlights of the Way Forward *vis-a-vis* Political Parties as well as civic and electoral education. In this regard, we would like to reiterate the generous support that we received from our development Partners including the GOI and ECI, UNDP, DANIDA, Government of Japan, SDC, International IDEA and the Government of Norway, BRIDGE and AEC, AUSAID, and most recently the DIPD and UN Women. We look forward to collaborating with them in the future and acknowledge with gratitude their commitment to a vibrant democracy and for championing free and fair elections.

30. Finally, I would like to thank all the distinguished guests for your participation in this Seminar. Above all I laud the commitment of the Political Parties to serve and play a meaningful role in nurturing a sound democratic culture in the Kingdom of Bhutan!

Thank you and Tashi Deleg!

Draft Concept Note
Bhutan Democracy Dialogue

to promote democracy and democratic culture

The Bhutan Democracy Dialogue (BDD) is an Initiative jointly conceptualized in 2014 by all the registered Political Parties of Bhutan and endorsed by the Election Commission of Bhutan as a forum for facilitation of the Political Parties to nurture and strengthen democracy in Bhutan.

BDD shall function under the guidance of a Steering Committee (SC) in the Election Commission of Bhutan formed with representation from all Political Parties.

Vision

The Vision of BDD shall be:

Bhutan with a mature democratic culture and vibrant democracy with well-functioning and responsible Political Parties.

Mission

The Mission of BDD shall be to:

Promote vibrant democracy in keeping with the will of the people through dialogue, and partnership amongst political parties as “Bhutanese First”.

Objectives

The Objectives of BDD shall be to:

1. Promote a culture of dialogue and cooperation among the parties in between elections.
2. Build leadership capacity and skills of members of the political parties to strengthen and nurture the Bhutanese democracy.

Legal Framework

1. BDD shall abide strictly as per the provisions of the Laws.
2. The SC shall, with the approval of the Election Commission, issue rules and regulations to meet the objectives of the BDD.

Organizational Arrangements

1. The SC shall have an Election Commissioner, President/Vice President and General Secretary of a Party with the Secretary of ECB/Registrar of Political Parties as the Member-Secretary of the Committee.
2. The SC shall be chaired by an Election Commissioner and the representative of the Political Party serve as the Vice Chair on a rotation basis for a period of one year.
3. The Regular SC shall meet, at least, twice in a year.
4. The ECB shall budget for the activities of the SC under the regular budget activities of the Commission.

Activities

The activities of the BDD shall be outlined in an Annual Work Plan prepared in synchrony with the Financial Year and budgeted under regular Budget of the ECB to include *inter-alia*:

1. Seminars/Workshop/Conferences;
2. Celebrate International Democracy Day/Constitution Day/National Day etc.;
3. Institutional development of parties; and
4. Capacity building of members.

We the undersigned append our Signature this day 2014 as the Founding Signatories of BDD

Political Parties

ECB

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PDP

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DPT

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CEC

ECB