

Bhutan climbs a learning curve for happiness

By John Elliot from riding the elephant blog

Sunday 29 May 2011



Jigmi Yoeser Thinley, the 58-year old prime minister of Bhutan, (right) says he was rebellious when he was young with “hair below my shoulders”. In 1974, he even wore jeans to a royal coronation that took place in front of a golden Buddha in Thimpu’s majestic Tashichhodzong.

“Now I am a soldier of tradition” he says proudly – arguing, as do many Bhutanese of his generation, that the remote Himalayan kingdom’s unique traditions will not be undermined by consumerism, satellite television and other diversions that are currently spawning violent teenage gangs on urban streets with drug and other problems.

“Youth must be given an opportunity to experiment and have our support and tolerance for what may be worrying signs that what we value may be lost,” he told visitors to an India-Bhutan *Mountain Echoes* literary festival a few days ago (right). “Our youth are having their fling, but they will return”.

That optimism is based on the experience of the prime minister’s generation, who initially rebelled against their homeland’s traditions when they returned from education in neighbouring India and elsewhere abroad 30 or 40 years ago (Bhutan’s schools then were inadequate).

The outside pressures are now enormously greater, challenging the basic precepts of Gross National Happiness (GNH) that were first mooted more than 30 years ago by the then King Jigme Singye Wangchuck to initiate broader national priorities than economic growth-oriented GDP.

The GNH principles, which include maintaining traditional culture, good governance, and a sustainable environment, give a perspective and a policy framework for Bhutan’s parliamentary democracy that was introduced by the king three years ago.

They are however being challenged, and not just by the young, as economic growth (mainly based on exporting hydroelectric power to neighbouring India) and prosperity breed corruption and greed that threaten to reduce the priority of GNH’s basically Buddhist values.

Bhutan’s new parliament will also inevitably become more party-political, with politicians looking for way to maintain their power and be re-elected rather than caring for tradition, and there will be large population movements from placid rural communities to tougher competitive urban centres.

Squeezed in the Himalayas between India and China, Bhutan and its tiny population of under 700,000 are on a steep learning curve, which would challenge the most sophisticated societies, as the country adapts and its rulers learn new roles.

“We are moving from being subjects to being citizens responsible for governance,” says Kinley Dorji, a prominent journalist who is now the government’s director of information. “Everyone is trying to figure out how we relate to each other,” says Pek Dorji, who runs the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy.

Occasionally the learning goes awry, as it has just done over a ban on smoking and owning tobacco. Banning smoking appears to have popular (and Buddhist) support, even though it is described by the prime minister as “the tyranny of the majority”, but the law’s implementation is not popular. You can own tobacco and smoke it (privately), providing you declare where you bought it and don’t import too much from abroad, and smoke it quickly enough (import receipts

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are only valid for as month).

Those who get caught in the ill-thought-through and badly implemented Tobacco Control Act (TCA) could end up in jail – as a 23-year old young monk has done, sentenced to three years' imprisonment for owning a small quantity of chewing tobacco worth about £1.30. He has recently lost an appeal against the sentence, and three more men have been similarly sentenced to jail in the past few days for smuggling a few packs of cigarettes.

This has unleashed a torrent of [complaints on blogs](#), [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). Tshering Tobgay, the parliament's opposition leader, is emerging as a serious voice of constructive opposition, partly through his blog <http://www.tsheringtobgay.com/> and [Twitter http://twitter.com/#!/tsheringtobgay](http://twitter.com/#!/tsheringtobgay) activities. "I called the Tobacco Control Act draconian. It's much worse. It's utter madness. Amend the Tobacco Control Act. And stop this madness before our people go out of control," [Tobgay wrote this week](#).

On [Twitter](#), maybe significantly, Dorji Wangchuk, director of the king's Royal Office for Media, has backed the complaints. He runs a Royal [Twitter](#) page <http://twitter.com/#!/RoyalBhutan> , but a few days ago he said [on his personal page](#) : "I have written to my MPs to revisit certain provisions of the TCA. Wish I could also make my letter public".

It looks as if this will be sorted out soon because the law is a muddle and the sentences excessive. The prime minister is likely to tidy up the border controls, and the King, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, who appears to believe the penalties are far too harsh, could encourage legislative amendments and even pardon those jailed [under his constitutional rights to command legislation and reduce sentences](#).

There are more problems looming. Tourism is planned to more than triple from 30,000 to 100,000 visitors annually within two years, and there is concern about growing traffic congestion. The pressures on Bhutan to give up its traditions, sliding southwards to be subsumed in the Indian subcontinent's social, environmental and other failings are therefore immense.

As the king told parliament recently, "If even a small fraction of the problems that plague other nations appear in Bhutan, our small society will be forever afflicted and we may never regain our jewel of a nation".

A longer version of this article appears on John Elliott's Riding the Elephant blog – <http://ridingtheelephant.wordpress.com/>

See also <http://blogs.independent.co.uk/2011/05/20/bhutans-king-jigme-tells-parliament-he-is-to-marry/>