

Challenges Faced by Political Parties in Bhutan's Election: Perspectives from the Political Party Representatives

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Abstract

Political parties face various challenges, and Bhutan is no exception. While Bhutan's democratization is often defined as a unique process, the practical issues facing the political parties are not different. This study examines the challenges faced by political parties in Bhutan's election through in-depth semi-structured interviews of key informants of all political parties and a thematic analysis. It discusses Bhutan's electoral experience, a limited financial base of the parties, difficulty of attracting competent candidates, and fluctuating party members. The content analysis of the interviews explored factors that motivated and influenced the political parties and workers to participate in the electoral process. Besides the issues of sustainability and representation of parties outside the parliament, the paper contends that Bhutan's case is not different from matured democracies where political corruption such as bribery, illegal solicitation of votes, mudslinging, and defamation are confronted during the election.

Keywords: Bhutan; Challenges; Democratic setting; Electoral process; Political Parties.

Introduction

Democracy is a popular form of governance, with 167 countries functioning through political parties and electoral systems; however, some Pacific islands states have no political parties (Forde 2018). Political parties and political systems are important for consolidating democracy and for aggregating interests, sustaining pluralism, and

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providing freedom to organize (Mobrand, 2018). Political parties are the vehicles of democratic articulation. Similarly, the electoral systems are fundamental mechanisms to construct a dynamic democratic political society (Linz & Stepan, 1996).

Bhutan became a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy in 2008. The political parties and the partisan politics were new to the people, and as such the general public viewed the political parties and politicians with suspicion and scepticism (Kesang Dema, 2018). Nonetheless, the Bhutanese reluctantly accepted the democracy initiated by the king. The Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) initiated a rigorous education and advocacy programmes to educate and inform the public about the election. Two rounds of mock elections held in April and May 2007 educated the entire population on the primary and general rounds of the National Assembly election, and sensitized them on the election procedures, the political parties, and the usage of the Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) (Sonam Kinga, 2020). Since then, the ECB conducted three National Assembly elections in 2008, 2013 and 2018, and a total of five political parties participated in these elections: Bhutan Kuen-nyam Party (BKP), Druk Chirwang Tshogpa (DCT), Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT), Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT), and Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP). The national and international election and media observers reported the 2008 election as successful, with a voter turnout of 79.4 percent, which indicated a strong state institutional support and confirmation of consolidation and establishment of firm democracy in Bhutan (European Union, 2008).

Democracies and electoral system across the globe face several issues and challenges in the process of political maturation and modernization. Bhutan's emerging democracy with its parties and elections system is no exception. There were sporadic media reports on the challenges faced by the political parties. Before 2018, political parties had deregistered 594 members due to membership irregularities (Sonam Pelden, 2018). After the 2018 election, only 1.7 percent of the country's total population are reported to be members of political parties (Subba, 2019). The membership retention of the current ruling party Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT), in 2019, was only 154 out of 11,000 registered members in 2018 (Subba, 2019).

Despite its participation in the 2013 election, Druk Chirwang Tshogpa became ineligible to receive the state funding due to its failure to garner a minimum of 10 percent of the votes in the primary round of election (Tenzin Namgyal, 2018). The challenges facing the political parties manifest through membership deregistration and party disqualification from participating in the election.

So far, no study has been conducted to understand and examine the issues and challenges facing the political parties in Bhutan. To fill up this gap and start academic and national discourse on the topic, the current study examines the first-hand experience of challenges faced by political parties in Bhutan. The study also analysed reasons behind those challenges.

Literature Review

The kings of Bhutan have always believed in democracy as a reliable governance system both for the present and future and empowered people to elect their government. The Bhutanese multi-party system has two rounds of elections: primary and general rounds. More than two political parties can contest in the primary round, while in the general round two parties that received the maximum votes can participate for election to the National Assembly of Bhutan, the lower house of the bicameral parliament. 20 non-party-based representatives elected from each district and five nominees of His Majesty the King form the National Council of Bhutan, the upper house. The Bhutanese parliament consists of three institutions: the National Assembly, the National Council, and His Majesty the King. The tenure of MPs of both the National Assembly and the National Council is five years. Scholars consider Bhutan's democratization to be unique due the influence of the Buddhist values and its introduction by the Fourth Majesty without domestic or external pressure (Long, 2019; Turner et al., 2011; Karma Ura, 1994). Masaki (2013) termed Bhutan's democracy a 'home-grown natural democracy'.

Bhutan adopted the first-past-the-post system (FPTP) electoral system using EVM and postal ballot facilities for voting by the registered voters. So far, five political parties participated in the three rounds of parliament elections: Bhutan Kuen-nyam Party (BKP), Druk

Chirwang Tshogpa (DCT), Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT), Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT), and Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP). Bhutan People United Party (BPUP), one of the first parties to be formed, was disqualified due to lack of credible leadership and the capacity to form the government, and unclear aspirations and ideology (Sonam Kinga, 2020). The party later merged with DPT.

Since there were only two parties (DPT and PDP) contesting the first election in 2008, no primary round was held. DPT formed the first democratically elected government after winning 45 out of 47 seats while PDP became the opposition party. In the 2013 election, two incumbent parties were joined by BKP, DCT, and DNT. However, BKP was disqualified after failing to field candidates from Gasa (BBS, 2013). Both new parties (DNT and DCT) could not make it through the primary round. PDP won 32 seats while DPT with 15 representatives formed the opposition in the National Assembly (ECB, 2013).

Two new parties (DGT and DKT) tried to participate in the third round of election in 2018, but could not register due to a lack of broad-based membership (Subba, 2018). DCT dissolved itself voluntarily due to financial reasons. PDP could not get through the primary round, and DNT formed the third democratic government with 30 representatives. DPT with 17 representatives again formed the opposition. The ruling party, DNT won all four by-elections held in 2021 following the resignation of four opposition MPs.

Political Parties

A democratic setup through party establishment and systems, particularly in multi-party democratic states, is indispensable for democracy (Lipset, 2000; Ankar, 2000). A majority of voters agree political parties are integral institutions of any democratic state (Holmberg, 2003). Political parties are central actors which are expected to govern the country democratically for the welfare of its people.

Generally, political parties include individuals or groups in a society to function in a given political system. Political parties have to uphold the true faith in the Constitution and the electoral laws of Bhutan,

promote national unity and progressive economic growth, and ensure a just and harmonious society. During the public consultation of the draft constitution in Thimphu the Fourth Majesty stated that “Political party is important. In our country, if the party system functions well, we can fulfil the national aspirations. And if the party system fails, there is every risk that our country may encounter a political crisis as in any other countries” (Sonam Tobgye, 2016). Since the 2008 mock elections and three consecutive parliamentary elections, Bhutan’s nascent democratic process has seen much progress especially in terms of transition and consolidation of democracy (Sonam Kinga 2020; Long, 2019; Turner & Tshering, 2014).

The political parties in democracies across Latin America and Western Europe are confronted with challenges, leading to change in behaviours and structures of the parties. Emerging party systems in developing countries face various problems of instability, uncertainties and varying trends of political behaviours. Parties are found to be more ambiguous and uncertain (Lupu & Riedl, 2012), less or un-institutionalized (O’Donnell, 1996), with insufficient party sponsors and funding (Burnell, 1998; Folwer & Smirnov, 2007), weaker attachments of voter, less women participation in parties (Manning, 2005), party membership uncertainty (Swatuk, 2005), and party systems organizing along salient social cleavages (Dix, 1989; Kitschelt, 1992).

Both the study in Indonesia and Bolivia by Slater and Simmons (2013) and in Africa by Bleck and Van de Walle (2013) showed how problems facing the political parties had pushed them to rely increasingly on ‘valence dimension’ and ‘clientelism’ vis-à-vis the electorate, resulting in higher political uncertainties and corruptions. Those examples and existing literature clearly show how maintaining political parties particularly in developing democracies is challenging. There are varying party behaviours mostly in countries that went through the third wave of democratization (Lupu & Riedl, 2012). Emerging democracies often face challenges in having a viable and competitive party system (Burnell & Gerrits, 2010). Parties in these countries are often poorly organized and lack organizational strength with unstable financial footings other than relying on state patronage. These are due

to the different emerging contexts than in advanced democracies, pervading democratic and party uncertainties (Lupu & Riedl, 2012).

Bhutan's political parties and electoral systems are facing similar challenges as in developing countries. Turner and Tshering (2014) assessed Bhutan's democratization process by studying the elections of 2008 and 2013 based on the indicators of openness, regularity, and acceptability of the election. In terms of openness, the authors expressed concerns about the temporary nature of political parties and the low turnout of women in politics. The study indicated that political parties are formed for, or active only during elections, with little activity and function to perform in between the elections due to a lack of sufficient funds. Nayak et al. (2018) observed the political maturity of parties during the 2018 election. However, the shortage of resources and experienced candidates made up for the insufficient fund. In Long's (2019) study of the performance of Bhutan's democratization using 15 variables of the Bertelsmann Stiftung Index (BTI), Bhutan did well in 11 variables and 4 areas, but not in commitment to democratic institutions, political and social integration, party systems and interest groups.

The Party Finance

Political financing plays a key role in creating a dynamic political process in any democracy. Folwer and Smirnov (2007) underscored the crucial role of rules about party and campaign finances to political parties, candidates, and the health of democracy. Berenschot (2015) highlighted the escalating costs of election, which not only makes it difficult for new parties to contest against the well-established ones, but also opens threats of undue influence, corruption, and money politics triumphing over ideology. African democracies, particularly from oppositions, have claimed that insufficient funding undermines the entire system of democratic elections (Luna, 2020). To counter such practices, Luna (2020) unpicked electoral democracy of African countries and Ghana's political financing through 'iron square' strategies of financing, besides tax exemptions, subsidies, membership dues, and fund-raising activities. A recent comparative analysis of developing democracies in Southeast Asia by Hamada and Agrawal (2021), Mobrand et al. (2019), and Simandjuntak (2021) highlighted

persisting political finance challenges that are common to the region, such as the ‘absence of regulations, intertwined business–government relations, weak bookkeeping practices of political parties, and a low level of compliance’. On other democracies’ fronts, Katz and Peter (1995) pointed out the influence of political parties to bandwagon in the party cartels, affirmed by Berenschot (2015) as more mundane challenges affecting parties and voters in both advanced and developing democratic contexts. In this regard, countries like Germany and Norway provide subsidies to parties while parties in Ireland and Britain depend on membership dues (Burnell, 1998). In Canada and Australia, election expenditures are reimbursed through public subsidies, while the Netherlands and Denmark provide funds to parties for general administration, policy research, political education and promotion of young people and women’s participation.

In Bhutan, the *Public Election Fund Act 2008* guides the party finance and political expenses. The election expenses are defined as “The costs incurred or authorized in respect to the election campaign from the date of issuance of the announcement of election by the ECB till the date of declaration of result” (ECB, 2008). According to the Act, although the ECB provides equal funds to parties for electoral campaigns, a party loses eligibility if it fails to garner at least 10 percent of the valid votes cast in the previous primary round of the election. Apart from the state funding for election campaigns, the act mandates parties to raise funds only from membership dues and voluntary contributions from their candidates and members. Long (2019) observed that with a fewer number of party members the Bhutanese political parties face difficulty in functioning as a political force due to insufficient funds. Swatuk (2005) argued that parties may lose support and membership fees from more passive members at the periphery and due to fluctuation in total party members. For instance, Mobrand (2018) presented Europe’s recent trend where parties depend more on state support than mass memberships because of plummeting contributions from party members. On the contrary, in developed countries like the USA, fundraising for political parties and politicians is flexible. For instance, in 2012, the Obama campaign raised almost 6.5 million dollars using social media (Lallana, 2012). The International IDEA (2021) also reported a resource for political parties

through public funding. Nearly 70 percent of party-based democratic countries provide some sort of direct public funding to political parties and candidates. In contrast to advanced democracies, 50 percent of Southeast Asian countries with multiparty elections adopt provisions for direct public funding. Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia and Timor-Leste regularly provide public funding. Besides regular schemes of funding, political parties and candidates are also provided with free or subsidized access to the media, tax relief, premises for campaign meetings, and subsidized postage costs as indirect funding mechanism support. Such practices in multiparty democracy are desirable to reduce the influence of big private donors in politics.

Human Resources

According to Okbar (2006) candidates never run an election on party labels in Jordan and argued that candidacy is a liability, not to be trusted. Okbar and Gandhi (2009), in their joint study, showcased how parties are inclined to recruiting candidates who can contribute personal funds into election campaigns. In Egypt, the campaign investment made by candidates exceeds the legal limit of \$12,300, and as such candidates in Egypt and Jordan are run by families, friends and acquaintances who stand to benefit from having elected officials from their circle. Diamond (2002) pointed out that parties have to look for candidates who can sustain themselves if they lose elections. He also validated that having someone who can assist in resources and electoral expenditure is crucial in strengthening the party. In addition, it is a challenge to get party leadership who could attract candidates based on the party's ideologies and enjoys voters' confidence (Gunther and Diamond, 2003). Bolivia's multiparty democracy has similar competing issues on restoring the confidence of the party through candidates that can build confidence in the grassroots (Floru, 2020). In Mexico and Syria with strict party discipline, the electoral process is expensive since it is rare to have candidates with personal support (Okbar & Gandhi, 2009). Moreover, women consider politics as a place for men. As a result, women are found in more robust numbers in the civic sector than political arenas (National Democratic Institute, 2010).

In Bhutan, the political parties must have one representative from every constituency. As noted in the introduction, the BKP in 2013 was disqualified from contesting after failing to get candidates from the Gasa district constituencies. Parties such as BPUP, DKT, and DGT failed to register as a political party due to a lack of broad-based membership and credible party leadership (Sonam Kinga, 2020; Subba, 2018). Besides the legal requirement, political parties in Bhutan have difficulty in attracting highly qualified candidates due to insufficient funds for the parties (Long, 2019). Bhutanese women are reluctant and not confident to participate in politics. They also perceived that they cannot be good politicians (Kuensel, 2018). The 2018 election saw fewer women participation. Of the 188 candidates only 19 were women (10.1%).

Even in well-established democracies, retaining party membership for party support has been a challenge. The democracies in South Asia faced similar patterns (International IDEA, 2007). Forde (2018) reported the declining political party membership across the world. Decline in the membership often leads to low levels of trust and lower political participation. The decline in party membership is an erosion of party loyalty (Norris, 2005). Further, after the democratic mobilization of the late 1980s and the early 1990s, post-communist democracies registered an abrupt decline in the electoral participation, with averages of below 40 percent (Lancu & Soare, 2016). In Indonesia, candidates rely on friends, influential people, and winnable brokers since parties have less mobilization strength (Berenschot, 2015). Parties depend on local representatives who connect citizens with parties or candidates, making them more influential and prominent.

In Bhutan, the election act mandates parties to have party coordinators, supporters and office bearers at national, regional, district and gewog levels (ECB, 2008). The candidates and party members should not be members of other political parties. Further, individuals from civil, military, and religious communities should remain apolitical (ECB, 2008). Parties should be broad-based with cross-national membership and support for national unity (ECB, 2008).

In a panel discussion held for the political parties one party representative spoke about the victimization of party supporters and the lack of effective women participation in politics as determining factors for increasing party membership (Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy [BCMD], 2019). Similarly, the decrease in voter turnout is an indication of a lack of commitment to democratic institutions such as political parties (Long, 2019). Thus, the lesser number of party members and coordinators is directly proportional to the voter turnout. Kuensel (2018) also reported frequent switching of memberships and candidates due to shifts in party affiliations of the voters.

Election Campaign

At any given point of the election, political parties spring into action to perform what is unequivocally their primary function, which is to communicate to voters and conduct the campaign. Such functions of political parties determine the vibrant political discourse, platform, and culture. In the political ethnography of the Yadav community in northern India Michelutti (2007) argues that “Vernacularisation of democratic politics” gives rise to popular participation of the marginalized sections of populations on one hand and popular candidates and political parties on the other. Similarly, Sonam Kinga (2020) wrote about the adoption of moral discourses by political parties and politicians to influence the Bhutanese electorates. As such, campaigning and communicating with voters influence the electoral process. Mair and Katz (1995) call for a favourable communication mechanism between parties and voters. The Bhutanese political party representatives highlighted the lack of interaction between aspiring politicians and voters (BCMD, 2019). Further, they highlighted the misuse of social media, creating social division, and engaging in mudslinging and character assassination (BCMD, 2019). During the 2018 National Assembly elections the ECB reported 21 election disputes, out of which 14 were related to misuse of social media concerning elections and political parties. Unlike advanced democracies, the new democracies are challenged with technologies limiting communication and the spread of information that contributes towards generating uncertainty (Lupu & Riedl, 2012).

Methodology

This study used qualitative analysis through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and content analysis to understand first-hand direct experience and observations by political parties. Qualitative study using semi-structured interview methods is effective in gathering open-ended data, exploring perspectives and deriving in-depth understanding of experiences (DeJonckeeere & Vaughn, 2019). Bernard (2002) and Lyon and Hardesty (2005) ensured that purposive sampling is especially exemplified through the key informant technique and informant's willingness to share the information. Therefore, the selective and purposive sampling technique was employed in this study to gather rich data from key informants who are the core representative of their party, and possess rich knowledge, experiences and willingness to participate in the study. Two key representative respondents from each party were purposely sampled for interview. However, a total of only eleven (9 male and 2 female) were interviewed face-to-face. Three parties had only one respondent and while one party was not existed during the study. The respondents consist of representatives from various party backgrounds who either served/are serving as party founders, presidents, vice presidents, secretary generals, parliamentarians, party executive members and active party workers/members. The interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and decoded for further content analysis to ensure the authenticity of data and analysis. The recordings were assured confidentiality and anonymity. The broad research question "What are the challenges confronted by the political parties in the electoral process of Bhutan's democracy?" was asked followed by specific probing questions and comments.

Result and Discussion

Financial Challenges

All 11 respondents from seven political parties reported financial constraint as the main challenge throughout the election process. All parties depend on one-time registration fee, annual membership fee, and voluntary contributions from registered party members and candidates. This is similar to the European political parties (Swatuk,

2005), Burnell, 1998: Mobrand, 2018). Two of 11 respondents reported that some people wait for the registration and ECB's acceptance of the party to make a contribution. Unlike the publicly funded parties in Cambodia, Indonesia and Timor-Leste, Bhutanese parties first had to get registered before raising funds from the registered candidates and members. Most respondents felt that the voluntary contribution of money is insufficient and fluctuating. The membership dues for political parties range from Nu. 50 to Nu. 300 during this study. As presented by Swatuk (2005) and Mobrand (2018) in European electoral context, two respondents stated that parties cannot increase fees due to ramifications of plummeting membership and consequent reduced financial contribution. Conversely, five respondents felt that the membership reduction does not have much impact on party finances because the dues and fees members pay are minimum. However, they indicated that the members are necessary to expand the electoral base of the party. This confirms Swatuk's (2005) argument on losing the support to the party due to decreasing membership. This shows that parties are compelled to maintain minimal fees and dues for candidates and members.

The party founders and candidates had been the sole investor in the party formation and electoral processes in general. Some parties were financially supported by the party founders, family members and acquaintances. One founder invested Nu. 1.9 million while another invested around Nu. 2 million during the party formation. One party had to avail loan for party expenses which later ended up selling the founder's assets to repay the loan. From the candidates, two respondents mentioned that there are candidates who voluntarily contributed between Nu. 300,000 and 500,000 while few young/new candidates did not contribute even a single penny. It only indicates that only individuals with financial advantage are encouraged to form a party and participate in the electoral process. At the same time, the data suggest that not everyone in the party contributes equally and some have to bear more costs than others. Is money required to be a politician? Or does one have to be rich to form a political party or join politics? While the socio-economic status of the people participating in the election needs proper exploration, the requirement for party candidates and founders to contribute significant amounts to party

funds suggests that one must have enough resources to participate in politics. Moreover, the implication of unequal financial contributions from candidates on the party functioning needs further exploration.

For parties having elected candidates, their party charter requires them to contribute 10 percent of their monthly salary. This is in addition to voluntary contributions from candidates and party members. This suggests that the certainty and sustainability of a party, directly or indirectly, depends on the party's electoral success and candidates to have a regular source of income for their political organization. However, the party's sustainability and winning cannot be equated. This is because the incumbency effect has not been advantageous in Bhutan's context during elections. As stated by Turner and Tshering (2014) Bhutanese voters indicated a willingness to change the government.

Parties outside the parliament depend only on the membership fees, registration fees, and voluntary contributions from their candidates. This indicates that electorally unsuccessful parties and candidates depend on their ability to contribute financially or on state funding during the campaign. As an organization, it is difficult for political parties to ensure secured jobs. The individual candidates and members have to sustain themselves after losing the election. In hindsight, DCT in 2018 could not participate after failing to garner 10 percent of votes and was ineligible for state funding. It would be interesting to observe if BKP can come back in 2023 as it too failed to garner 10 percent of votes in the 2018 primary round to be eligible for the state funding. All these challenges, on the flip side, question the effort and dynamism of political party leadership and organization to influence candidates. Increasing membership drive not only for voting support but also for financial sustenance.

Considering limited ways to raise funds for the political parties, the findings indicate that the financial approaches for the party are prescriptive and not favourable for the functioning and sustaining of the political parties. The formation of political parties and participating in the electoral process as a party and its candidate is costly. This suggests that there is a need to strengthen how others can

partake as a part of a political party or support political parties financially.

Although the existing state financing helps in ensuring a level playing field for parties and reducing corrupt practices, the data suggests that the fund is not sufficient to cover the expenses and to run the party office after the election. Unlike Denmark and the Netherlands case, state funding does not discriminate against candidates' gender, age, demography, location, and constituency size. It discourages a broad-based membership and the active participation of candidates as required by the Election Act. The provision of state finance based on different parameters could be a separate matter to explore in the future.

Human Resource Challenges

All 11 respondents stated that getting party candidates for election is a big challenge. One party founder mentioned that people do not participate without any backup plan to make a living because of the uncertainty of the winning the election. Three respondents mentioned that they had to convince some candidates to participate through informal networks despite their disinterest to join politics. One respondent who participated in the first National Assembly election mentioned about the difficulties faced by the two pioneer political parties in convincing people to join their party in 2008 since politicians were seen as radical, revolutionary or anti-monarchy and were received with scepticism and mistrust. Similarly, Sonam Tobgye (2016) stated the difficulty of convincing the Bhutanese people on the virtues of democracy and multi-party system. In particular, all respondents mentioned the difficulty of getting women candidates since most executives in the Bhutanese civil service are men.

In contrast to the above reasons, four respondents claimed getting candidates who fulfil legal requirements was not as difficult as recruiting someone who could help the party win the election. According to all 11 respondents, parties tend to recruit candidates, who are well-known in the community, have good past performances and experience, and those who can self-sustain and financially contribute to the party. This confirms the cases of Ghana and Uganda

studied by Luna et al. (2020). Similarly, Okbar and Gandhi (2009) discussed Egypt's case on how parties are inclined towards recruiting candidates with the capacity to direct personal money into the party. One party founder mentioned that an election is a losing battle for parties and candidates without a firm financial base. Some constituencies ended up recruiting candidates for the sake of meeting the electoral requirement since opponents were too influential and there was no possibility of winning the election. Six respondents mentioned that some people join the party to have a free-ride in the political and electoral process, which affirm Long's (2019) argument about the lack of commitment from the candidates to democratic institutions such as political parties.

Nine of 11 respondents stated that parties mainly preferred civil servants for their awareness and understanding of the national issues, policies and governance system compared to others. However, civil servants as an apolitical body are not allowed to participate, contribute, and engage in party-based political activities (ECB, 2008), and they have to resign to join politics. Since the election law disallows royal families, religious personalities, civil servants, military personalities, and local government members from participating, contributing and engaging in politics, there is a limited source of human resources for political parties for a limited population. Except for religious personalities and royal families, the direct responsibility of these sections of people in the electoral process is just electing their representatives.

Similarly, getting party members is a challenge in Bhutan. All political parties reported that the registered party members are too few and often fluctuating. All respondents reported that many party members resign right after the election for purposes of applying for jobs and contesting local government elections. One cannot be a member of more than one political party and registered members are required to renew their membership from time to time with the party and ECB. Four respondents mentioned that despite people's willingness to contribute, many are not willing to associate themselves with any political parties. Moreover, all respondents reported that party members are declining in between the elections. On this, two respondents shared their concern of losing allegiance to the party in

future elections which aligns with the argument of Norris (2005) on the erosion of loyalty and human capacity to the party. Losing allegiance to the party could also lead to a decrease in low voter turnout as raised by Long (2019) because the voters' commitment to democratic institutions like political parties is minimal.

Six respondents stated that people who can contribute substantially did not join as a party member due to future implications on their private businesses and associated political criticisms. As noted by Subba (2018), with only less than 2 percent of the population as political party members, the majority of the population are independent voters.

Regarding party coordinators and workers, all respondents reported that parties recruit and appoint more coordinators, supporters and party workers referred to as “japchorpas/leyjeypas” at Dzongkhag (district) constituency, and gewog (county) levels and prominently nominated during elections to represent and support their political party and candidates. With so many party coordinators and party supporters, all respondents reported that financial constraints aggravate during elections because parties compete to provide financial or material incentives to their party workers. Three respondents informed that since there is no fixed rate of payment for party workers it ends up parties to pay more than what is required. Nine respondents claimed that people do not come forward to support candidates and political parties willingly without any better incentives. Instead, the majority of respondents felt that party coordinators and workers perceive supporting political parties as an employment or earning opportunity. This undermines the larger purpose of democracy and political parties. In contrast, four respondents mentioned that despite giving some incentives it is difficult to get the support of the party workers. Three respondents reported that people are not willing to be party workers because of the fear of political repercussions in post-election. One respondent stated that the kinship system and close-knit community is discouraging the people to support different political parties openly. This depicts about the Bhutanese people's commitment towards community vitality and intolerance towards social division and disintegration based on the party politics. Political parties are often blamed for social division and factionalism.

By this, as many people become party members and supporters, differences based on party lines are inevitable.

The above findings suggest that only rich and wealthy can form parties or participate as candidates. Having more members and party machinery do not always contribute to a party's cause, human resources or revenue but parties have to bear the cost of paying them during an election. All respondents perceive that the party machineries are responsible for political corruption such as bribery, creating rumours, negative campaigning, mudslinging, inducement of fear, and creating division in society during elections. Further, party machineries are whined of illegally soliciting votes at the grass-root level by giving money on behalf of parties. While party coordinators and workers are influential and essential for parties and candidates to convince their ideas and manifestos to the voters at the constituency level, it has negative consequences on the party and the electoral process as a whole. Therefore, findings suggest not only the need for a robust mechanism of checks and balances on the party spending but also to review the requirement of party coordinators both in numbers and conduct.

Other Procedural Challenges

Four respondents reported that political parties confront procedural challenges pertaining to burdens imposed by rules, procedures and other requirements of electoral processes. Some key challenges raised are with regards to the registration of political parties, candidates and other members, equivocal interpretation of legislative frameworks before the election, campaigning conducts and procedures during the election and the relevancy and sustainability of the political parties after the election. Five respondents stated that the processes of registering political parties are too cumbersome that it is difficult for political parties to surmount the challenges. Besides submitting voluminous documents, respondents reported that parties are required to establish secretariat offices across the country, confirm party candidates and members and collect voluntary contributions from members and submit to the ECB. In such cases, three respondents shared their experiences that many people do not want to contribute and be a member of the party until ECB provides the registration of

the party. Similarly, to fulfil legal requirements to be a candidate, some processes are challenging. For instance, one respondent mentioned the difficulty in tracing a long-graduated university just to validate qualifications. It was required to produce a qualification certificate despite it being recognized in the civil service before joining politics.

Even during elections and campaigning, civil servants are not allowed to attend common forums. Considering these, there are around 54,000 public officials including over 29,000 civil servants who are mostly educated and qualified but are not allowed to engage in politics (BCMD, 2019).

The above findings on the systemic challenges indicated that there is a need to streamline rules, procedures and systems to ensure a conducive environment for political parties. First, the participation and recruitment of candidates is guided by the electoral and civil service rules and regulations to partake in electoral processes and undertake other functions for a vibrant democracy. For instance, the rules and regulations for civil servants to uphold 'apolitical-ness' and to be a candidate or support political parties provide less room to politically engage and participate in the electoral process. For a small society like Bhutan, the term apolitical-ness has led to disallowing public gatherings, festivals, and social functions during the election period. The interpretation of the term apolitical is equivocal at the moment and there is a need to deliberate and review 'apolitical-ness' so that people can engage, deliberate and have the discussion of political nature in public and private spheres without fear of surveillance and retribution.

During the election, political parties are allowed to do door-to-door campaign. All respondents stated that door-to-door campaigning is time-consuming and physically exhausting. It incurs substantial financial costs to parties vis-à-vis encouraging political corruption such as bribery and soliciting votes illegally. This would suggest that there is a need to review on campaign modalities. On other hand, all political parties commended the ECB's initiative for arranging a common forum in 2018 elections, where all candidates and parties can campaign together by gathering people.

Furthermore, political parties were allowed to campaign only during the day from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm. The majority of respondents felt that the timing was inconvenient for parties as most people had to go to work during the day. One respondent mentioned that most doors were locked during the day, and they could meet mostly children, elderly citizens, and some housemaids.

The study also found that almost all the party secretariat offices were functioning based on goodwill voluntarism of candidates. Only one or two officials were paid whereas the rest of the party candidates and workers were working for free. Despite being required by the electoral laws, some political parties did not have a party secretariat office and some offices were manned solely by a secretary. Three respondents mentioned that parties outside the parliament lack good platforms to represent their voters and supporters in raising national concerns. This indicates that there is a need to provide platforms for political parties to come together to discuss and deliberate on ideas and plans concerning national issues. The Bhutan Democracy Dialogue (BDD) formed by four political parties and the Bhutan Democracy Forum organized by BCMD have brought political parties together.

Conclusion

Globally, democracy has been the popular governance system. In order to operationalize democratic values and principles, political parties are important institutions. They help aggregate and articulate peoples' concerns and interests besides many other functions. However, evidence indicates that political parties, particularly in developing democracies, are confronted with challenges which impede their functioning. Yet, challenges faced by parties are not much discussed in public forums and in the academic world, specifically in Bhutan. This study fills a gap by studying the challenges faced by Bhutanese political parties. Purposively, this study had chosen to listen to the key players of political parties which participated in three consecutive elections. The findings gathered through an in-depth semi-structured interview not only contributes to literature but also in policy decisions to strengthen political parties for vibrant democracy in Bhutan.

The findings showed that the major challenges faced by Bhutanese political parties are related to finance and human resource persisting in many developing democracies. Party founders in Bhutan played a significant role in sustaining the party through exorbitant investment particularly during the party formation processes. Once the parties were formed, their sustainability is contingent on candidates' ability to make financial contributions. Due to stringent legal requirements and onerous procedures, political parties in Bhutan face a challenge in getting competent candidates, particularly women. It is further accentuated by the equivocal interpretation of the requirement for people and institutions including the civil service to be apolitical.

As far as party membership is concerned, it is limited to rural areas where people have low qualification and less regular income. The rural people have more political engagement and contribution in strengthening political parties as opposed to people in urban areas with relatively high qualification and regular income. In this regard, there is a need to further investigate on how Bhutan can strengthen political engagement and contribute to strengthening political parties in particular. On the flip side, party machineries are rather a liability than a benefit to the political parties. Instead of willingly supporting the party, coordinators and workers are blamed for being driven by incentives and expectations. They are also perceived to be responsible for political corruption during elections. These challenges indicate there is a need to create a conducive electoral and political environment to have competent political parties in building vibrant democracy.

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