

BHUTAN: POLITICAL UPDATE

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Since the establishment of the monarchy in 1907, the King has had absolute authority and sole responsibility for nominating government ministers. In July 1998, the fourth king under the Wangchuck dynasty, Jigme Singhye Wangchuck, began a series of reform measures intended to transform Bhutan from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy. The July 1998 royal edict on administrative decentralization resulted in the transfer of administrative responsibilities from the king to a council of ministers whose members were elected for a 5-year term by the National Assembly of Bhutan.

2. Following the issuance of a royal decree, work began in 2001 on drafting Bhutan's first written constitution. This envisaged a transition to a two-party democratic system of governance with general elections and universal suffrage. Widespread consultations have been held, and the third and final draft of the constitution is expected to be presented to the newly elected National Assembly. In December 2006, King Jigme Singhye Wangchuck voluntarily abdicated the throne in favor of his son, the present King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck.

II. INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

3. To provide the institutional foundation for a system of democratic governance, the National Assembly of Bhutan has passed a number of important laws and regulations. These include a Public Finance Act, an Audit Act, a Labor Act and an Environment Protection Act. The Office of the Attorney General, an independent Anti-Corruption Commission, and an Election Commission had been established by early 2006.

4. Under Bhutan's new governance framework, the Parliament comprises the Monarch (as head of state), an elected National Council, and the National Assembly. The National Council serves as the upper house and comprises 25 members, one from each of the country's 20 districts and five nominees of the Monarch. The National Assembly comprises 47 elected members belonging to the two political parties which received the highest and second highest number of votes in the preliminary round of elections. The People's Democratic Party (DPT) and the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) have been registered by the Election Commission of Bhutan as the two main political parties for the elections to the National Assembly.

III. ELECTORAL PROCESS AND ELECTION OUTCOME

5. Elections for the National Council were held in two phases: on 31 December 2007 in 15 districts and on 29 January 2008 for the remaining 5 districts. Voter turnout was 53% and was affected by harsh winter weather. Elections for the National Assembly were held in all 20 districts on 24 March 2008, with a voter turnout of 74.9%. The result was an overwhelming victory for the DPT which captured 45 of the 47 seats. On 9 April 2008, the President of the DPT, Jigmi Y. Thinley, became Prime Minister. A 10-member cabinet has also been sworn in. The Prime Minister and members of the Cabinet have long experience of public service, five of the ten cabinet ministers having been ministers under the previous regime.

IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR ADB OPERATIONS

6. The new government is committed to reducing poverty, improving infrastructure, and maintaining Bhutan's progress toward achieving the Millennium Development Goals. The strategic thrust of the results-based country strategy and program (2006–2010) remains valid, being consistent with the priorities of the 9th National Development Plan as well as those of the forthcoming 10th National Development Plan. ADB country operations will continue to be guided by the four strategic areas of the CPS, as well as technical assistance for capacity development. Staying within the CPS framework, ADB will remain a responsive development partner of Bhutan.