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Issue Brief

Bhutan National Assembly Elections 2018: A Mandate for Change?

*Nihar R Nayak, Rajrajeshwari Singh &
Ashok K Behuria*

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Summary

Voters in Bhutan have shown their political maturity by bringing in a new government, which is an indicator of growing awareness about their rights and their role in holding governments to account. However, the government could face challenges in implementing its programmes as promised in the party manifesto due to shortage of resources and lack of experienced Parliamentarians.

Bhutan completed its third National Assembly elections to the lower house of the Parliament on October 18, 2018. The Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT) party won in the run-off election of the two phase system. Lotay Tshering, the president of DNT will be the new Prime Minister of Bhutan. The DNT, which was formed in 2013 and had secured third position in that year's National Assembly elections, has now secured a comfortable majority with 30 out of 47-seats in the 2018 elections. The Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT),¹ loosely translated as Bhutan Peace and Prosperity Party, has bagged 17 seats and will assume the role of the main opposition party for the second consecutive term.

Vote for Change?

The victory of the DNT shows that the 2018 elections were primarily a vote for change as was the case with the earlier elections. So far, in the three National Assembly elections held since 2008, the Bhutanese people have chosen three different parties to form the governments. In the 2013-elections, the voters had chosen the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP)² over the incumbent DPT in the second round, with support from DNT. However, this time round, the same ruling party (PDP) was unable to even qualify for the second round, being relegated to the third position with 27.2 per cent of the votes in the primary round in September 2018.

The results indicate that the DNT might have received support of the PDP and the Bhutan Kuen-Nyam (BKP)³ sympathizers. The DNT's popular election campaign slogans aimed at reducing the gap between the rich and the poor and the rate of unemployment, as stated in its manifesto, and extensive campaigning in the rural areas and social media could have played a crucial role to garner support across the country.

¹ DPT was formed on 25 July 2007 with the merger of the All People's Party and the Bhutan People's United Party. It was registered as a political party by Election Commission of Bhutan on 2 October 2007 and went on to win the first general elections in 2008 securing 45 out of 47 sets in the lower house. It lost the second elections in 2013, despite securing maximum percentage of votes (44.5 percent) in the first round. Finally, it secured only 15 seats with 45.1 percent of the popular votes.

² PDP was formed on March 24, 2007 and registered as a political party by the Election Commission of Bhutan on 1 September 2007. It fared miserably in the first general elections in 2008 with the DPT sweeping the polls. In the first round of the second general elections it polled less than DPT (44.5 percent) and finished second (32.5 percent). However, it went on to secure the support of DNT, which had garnered about 17 per cent of the votes and secured 32 seats in 2013 elections by bagging 54.88 percent of the votes in the second round to form the government.

³ BKP is a centre-left party wedded to social democracy. This party was not allowed to contest the elections in 2013 because it could not field two candidates fulfilling constitutional requirements of having a degree in education. However, in the 2018 elections it secured 9.7 percent of the votes.

International Community Responses

India was the first country to welcome the elections results. Prime Minister Narendra Modi on October 19 extended good wishes to Tshering on his party's victory and welcomed the successful conduct of general elections. He conveyed that India attached highest priority to further strengthening the unique ties of friendship and cooperation with Bhutan, which is based on shared interests and values, utmost trust, goodwill, and mutual understanding. The Prime Minister also invited Tshering to visit India. In return, Tshering thanked Prime Minister Modi for his greetings and good wishes and accepted the invitation to visit India at the earliest opportunity.

The US [State department spokesperson](#) Heather Neuert congratulated Bhutan on the successfully held elections and said the US would be looking forward to strengthening their friendly ties with Bhutan. She commended Bhutan's successful evolution into a democracy which, she expected, would serve as an inspiration to the region.

Other neighbouring countries of Bhutan and major powers have not yet officially reacted to the elections in Bhutan by November 5, 2018. It was interesting to note that China, as an important neighbour, chose not to react to the election results, as it did in the case of elections in Maldives, and recent political changes in Sri Lanka.

Bhutan's Democratic Journey

Bhutan completed a decade of competitive democracy with the holding of final round of elections to the National Assembly of the third Parliament on October 18, 2018. It experienced a major political transition in 2008 when it adopted a new constitution and followed by the first National Assembly elections in May 2008, perhaps learning lessons from popular resentment against Monarchy in Nepal.⁴ Bhutan transitioned to a monarchical constitutional democracy from a hereditary monarchy. Since then democracy in Bhutan has matured with each passing election, as one can conclude from the following.

Firstly, the system of multi-party democracy has functioned very smoothly with the parties sticking to their constitutional obligations, and new political parties entering the electoral scenario and operating without any hindrance. From two registered political parties in 2008, Bhutan had five registered political parties by June 2013. However, the number was reduced to four in 2018 with the Druk Chirwang Tshogpa's ([DCT](#)) [getting deregistered](#) by the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) on February 26, 2018 at its own request. It may be mentioned here that DCT had fared poorly in the 2013 primaries securing only 6 percent of the votes and was constitutionally

⁴ Pavan K Varma, "How democracy took roots in Bhutan" *The Hindu*, April 1, 2015.

ineligible for state funding. Media sources indicate that the supporters of [DCT allegedly lent their support to the DPT](#).

Secondly, Bhutan has been holding elections on regular basis without any political violence and the electoral campaigns have been conducted in a fairly disciplined manner. Thirdly, the voters have shown their political maturity by changing governments every five years, which is an indicator of growing political awareness about their rights and their role in holding governments to account. Fourthly, the media has acted fairly responsibly and made good use of the freedom guaranteed to it under the new constitution.

Surprising Primary Results

According to the ECB, in both the rounds of elections, the polling was peaceful barring some technical glitches with some electronic voting machines (EVM). In the primary round, the overall voter turnout was 66.36 percent with a total of 291,098 voters casting their votes out of the total of 438,663 registered voters. Around 108,580 votes were casted by postal ballots.⁵ The voters turn out indicated an increase in political awareness of the common people in comparison to the previous two elections.

Table 1: Parties position in the Primary round

Sl. No.	Political Parties	Votes on EVM	Postal Votes	Total Votes
1	BKP	18,064	10,409	28,473
2	DNT	55,166	37,556	92,727
3	DPT	53,108	36,912	90,020
4	PDP	56,180	23,703	79,883
Total		182,518	108,580	291,098

Source: Election commission of Bhutan (ECB). BKP- Bhutan Kuen-Nyam Party, DNT- Durk Nyamrup Tshogpa, DPT- Durk Phuensum Tshogpa, PDP- Durk Phuensum Tshogpa

⁵ Declaration of the Results of the Third Parliamentary Elections 2018: Primary Round of The National Assembly, *Election Commission of Bhutan*, 16 September 2018.

As the table indicates, the PDP secured the highest votes in the EVM, but performed poorly in the postal ballots, which affected its overall performance. The BKP secured the lowest number of votes.

However, most surprisingly, the DNT, which stood third in the 2013 primaries, secured the maximum number of votes, 92,722 (31.8 percent) and emerged as the most popular party among these four parties in terms of vote sharing and popularity. The DPT stood second with a total 90,020 votes (30.9 percent). While the DNT won in 16 constituencies, the DPT won in 22 constituencies, mostly in eastern Bhutan. The PDP won in nine constituencies securing 56,180 votes in EVM and only 23,703 in the postal ballots (27.4 percent).

The Second Round

As per ECB figures, the voter turnout was over 71.61 percent in the second round, a net gain of 5.2 percent over the first round and about 5.5 percent above the turnout in the 2013 elections. Of the 438,663 registered voters, 314,133 participated in the elections. Of the total votes cast, around 63 percent were through EVMs, and the rest were by postal ballots.

This round saw a realignment of forces away from DPT and in all probability, significant percentage of the votes polled by PDP and BKP swung towards DNT raising its poll percentage from 31.85 in the first round to 54.95, by about 13.10 percentage points. Despite the DPT managing to add 14.13 percentage points to its votes (from 30.92 percent to 45.05 percent), it was the DNT that won in the first-past-the-post system, in 30 seats while DPT won in 17.

Table 2

Sl. No.	Political Parties	EVM Votes	Postal Votes	Total Votes
1	DNT	112,783	59,485	172,268
2	DPT	86,770	54,435	141,205
Total		199,553	113,920	313,473

Source: Figures collated from the data provided at the website of ECB Bhutan (<http://www.ecb.bt/?p=6280>, accessed on November 5, 2018)

The voting pattern indicated that a large section of rural voters was not satisfied with the performance of the Tobgay government. As reported in the Bhutanese media, postal ballot services are availed by the civil servants, armed forces personnel, a section of the corporate and private employees, Bhutanese living abroad and those

with special needs. Since the DNT secured the highest votes from the postal ballots and only one thousand less than votes in the EVM ballot from the DPT, the party can be regarded as being popular among all classes of the society. Rural voters have also voted for the DNT and against the PDP for poor governance. It seems educated voters, civil servants and the Non-Resident Bhutanese population voted in favour of the DNT. DNT's anti-government campaign perhaps helped it to secure maximum seats from south-central region, which has been traditionally the stronghold of the PDP.

2018- Manifestos of the Political Parties

The PDP manifesto highlighted five “economic Jewels”, which, if harnessed efficiently, could help Bhutan realise its economic potential in the region.⁶ These economic jewels were: hydropower and energy, mining, agriculture, tourism and cottage (small and medium) enterprises.⁷ The party claimed that it would prioritize the friendship with India and foster good relations with the states bordering Bhutan.⁸ It also promised to continue the ongoing border negotiations with China. It talked about strengthening Bhutan's relations with the wider world through active participation in global, regional and multilateral organisations like EU, SAARC, and BIMSTEC.⁹

The DPT manifesto articulated that the main vision of the party, if it formed the government, would be to maintain gross national happiness (GNH) and bring about peace and prosperity in Bhutan. The goals set by the party to achieve this vision revolved around an all-round socio-economic, cultural, and environmental development.¹⁰ DPT's main priority would be to make Bhutan a self-sufficient economy by 2025. It also aimed to harness 10,000MW of hydropower energy, relying on India's goodwill and assistance.¹¹ In terms of foreign policy, the party too intended to ensure that close bilateral ties with India would be enhanced further.

The DNT's manifesto was reportedly based on feedback received during its top leaders' nationwide visits in January 2018 and their consultations with the people. Its policies included plans to introduce affordable health-care, and to have a sustainable and equitable economic development that contributes to the overall GNH. The manifesto revolved around ensuring inclusive economic development and reducing the widening gap between the rich and the poor. Another aspect that the DNT manifesto focused on is its promise to provide access to safe-drinking water to every Bhutanese citizen by the year 2021. The DNT vision included boosting

⁶ Election commission of Bhutan, Election manifesto of PDP (<http://www.ecb.bt/pp/pdp/pdpmanifesto2018.pdf>) August 24, 2018

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid, p40

⁹ P, 41

¹⁰ <http://www.ecb.bt/pp/dpt/dptmanifesto2018.pdf>

¹¹ Ibid

connectivity, promotion of Bhutan's culture to enhance tourism, and building of infrastructure to enhance connectivity. It also had plans to introduce childcare and maternity benefits to women to tackle the reduction in the number of childbirths in Bhutan. There was however, no mention of foreign policy issues in the manifesto.¹²

The BKP agenda included ensuring 100 percent functional irrigation on existing infrastructure; the overall development of the private sector to augment self-reliance, fostering quality education with added emphases on value-education and working on the overall economic and infrastructural development of the country. In terms of foreign policy, the party intended to strengthen Bhutan's friendship and cooperation with India based on mutual trust.¹³

Issues like rural development, agriculture, economic development and incentives to civil servants dominated all the manifestos. These manifestos were mostly designed to attract the attention and confidence of three important sections of the population, i.e., farmers, civil servants and private sector employees. The DNT and the BKP manifestos were slightly different in the sense that they talked about reducing gap between rich and poor and according more freedom to media respectively. No political parties elaborately discussed future foreign and national security policy of Bhutan. While DPT had promised to adopt the most 'diversified' foreign policy in 2013 (a euphemism for reducing dependence on India), it emphasized on enhancing relations with India in its 2018 manifesto. Interestingly, the PDP took exactly the opposite position. Significantly, no political parties mentioned the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) initiative either in their manifesto or during their election campaigning.

DNT: The New Actor in the Horizon

The following factors could be responsible for PDP's poor performances and emergence of DNT as a popular party. First, the prevailing anti-incumbency against the PDP, despite it bringing major changes in Bhutan's economic policies in the last five years. During the electoral campaign phase, the opposition parties highlighted the failure of the Tshering Tobgay government in addressing the issue of increase in unemployment, corruption, failure to improve education, health and connectivity facilities in rural areas, poor tax reforms, DPT's pro-BBIN policies and most importantly, the DNT's focus on the 'widening gap between the rich and poor' in the last five years of PDP rule.

Second, anticipating anti-incumbency sentiments among the electorate, the PDP gave tickets to new faces in 12 constituencies; however, that tactic did not succeed. The DNT fared better than PDP in those constituencies. Similarly, the DPT won

¹² <http://www.ecb.bt/pp/dnt/dntmanifesto2018.pdf>

¹³ <http://www.ecb.bt/pp/bkp/bkpmmanifesto2018.pdf>

maximum seats in eastern Bhutan, while PDP could only poll well in Kabisa_Talog in Punakha.¹⁴

Third, the PDP was, to some extent, overconfident about the primary elections. For instance, it was the last party to send the final list of candidates to the ECB and also the last to start its electoral campaign. In contrast, the DNT started campaigning six months before the date of the elections. DNT leaders including the current PM candidate, Lotay Tshering, undertook a nationwide tour in January 2018¹⁵ and started their campaign from eastern Bhutan, which is relatively underdeveloped.

Four, the DNT had an extremely strong social media campaign, which contributed to the rise in its popularity. Its election manifesto was the outcome of an extensive on-ground survey, addressing the grievances felt by the people of Bhutan.

Five, the Bhutanese people perhaps wanted a substantial change in the elections. Since Bhutanese democracy is relatively young and a large number of voters live in rural areas, in the previous elections, the voters had voted for the party rather than candidates and party names. However, the DNT's success indicated that Bhutanese voters have now understood the relevance of multiparty democracy and therefore voted for change and elected a new political party. Many voters in Thimphu in fact shared in the media that "they wanted both the old parties out of the race."¹⁶

Six, the postal ballots played a determining role in this elections too because of a significant increase in their number. Most importantly, the six eastern Dzongkhags, where DPT scored well, had the largest share of the postal ballot (66,969). This is almost half of the total 133,795 voters of 20 Dzongkhags. Therefore, DPT secured the second highest postal ballot this time after the DNT.

Seven, for the first time, the ECB introduced constituency-level debates with the presence of candidates of four parties who took active part in that. It is reported that the biggest beneficiary of this was the DNT, which did well in most of the debates and seemed to have prepared better than others for these debates which seemed to have enhanced its popularity and electoral support-base.¹⁷

Last but not least, DNT manifesto focused on health, rural development and promised to reduce the gap between the rich and poor which attracted both rural and urban voters. People's dissatisfaction with the PDP actually benefited the DNT more than DPT. The electorate, having tried out both PDP and DPT, perhaps wanted to try out a new party and with its promising agenda DNT seemed to appeal to their imaginations well. Moreover, almost all the candidates of the DNT were from

¹⁴ "The electoral surprise", *Kuensel*, September 19, 2018.

¹⁵ "DNT leaders tour southern dzongkhags" *Kuensel*, January 29, 2018.

¹⁶ Tashi Dema, « DNT and DPT to contest general round, *Kuensel*, September 16, 2018. [Also see http://www.kuenselonline.com/how-thimphu-went-the-dnt-way/](http://www.kuenselonline.com/how-thimphu-went-the-dnt-way/)

¹⁷ "Why PDP lost, DNT won and DPT held on", *The Bhutanese*, Thimphu, September 17, 2018.

professional background and its PM candidate, Lotay, was a popular general surgeon, which might have played a substantial role in winning popular confidence in favour of the party.

New Trends

There are certain new trends in Bhutanese politics which need to be understood well to interpret its domestic and foreign policies in future. First, unlike in the previous two elections, a new untried party won the elections. The ruling party was rejected by the people in the primary round. Second, while foreign policy was one of the major issues in the 2013 elections, it had lost its salience in the 2018 elections. Almost all the parties assured the electorate they would either improve or continue a good relationship with India. Third, the voters' participation was on the rise and it was quite high in this two-phase elections. Most importantly, women voters' participation rate was higher than that of male voters. Four, unlike in the 2013 elections, there was no discussion about external influence in the results. Five, the party symbols did not play any determining role and people voted for candidates, leadership and internal issues. Six, there were reports about increase in postal ballot voters compared to the previous elections. Seven, the highest number of women candidates were elected to the national assembly this time round. All women candidates of the DNT won the elections.

Challenges

The new government could face challenges in implementing its popular programmes as promised in the party manifesto due to shortage of resources and lack of experienced Parliamentarians. The DNT's election manifesto was a mix of populist and ambitious developmental promises. It has pledged to implement at least 25 of its promises in the first 120 days. Most importantly, the DNT has promised to "narrow the gap" between rich and poor in the next five years, which is a herculean task. This policy of the DNT could force it in a developmental direction which can indirectly challenge the GNH index, initiated by former King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the Fourth King of Bhutan. Another challenge could be to win the trust of both China and India to resolve its long-standing border disputes with China. Besides, the new government could face problems in tackling growing regionalism over language and developmental issues, natural disasters and sources of budget funding. Despite being one of the fastest growing economies in the region, Bhutan struggles to complete major hydro projects and other infrastructure projects like internal road connectivity, public transportation system, airports, schools and hospitals. Although India contributes 68 percent of the total external assistance, it would be a testing time for the new government to generate funds from other sources, given the smaller market and its strong, almost non-negotiable policy on environmental protection.

Bhutan's expectations from India

Since the DNT is a new political party and it did not have much focus on Bhutan's foreign policy in its manifesto, there was speculation in the media that the new government in Thimphu could follow a Nepal-like rebalancing policy between India and China. Surprisingly, ending that speculation, the PM in waiting, Lotaty Tshering, in a media interview has already stated that "Our [DNT] views are very clear on [foreign policy](#) and we believe that it cannot change every five years. Our King (Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck) will be the guiding force on matters of foreign policy... And on India, we believe that Bhutan-India relationship is non-negotiable."

While the new government has articulated its policy towards India and the latter has welcomed the electoral results, India now needs to wait and watch the new government's approach towards it. Ever since the diplomatic relationship was established in 1968 between Bhutan and India, it has emerged as one of the most celebrated success stories of India's neighbourhood policy in South Asia, characterized by mutual trust and understanding. Given the perceived role of India in determining its domestic politics, it was widely believed in Bhutan that India factor may actively or passively influence the 2018-parliamentary elections. However, during and after the elections, there was no noise whatsoever from Bhutan about India playing any role in the elections. On the contrary, in some quarters there were discussions about possible Chinese backing of some political forces in Bhutan. This is a positive sign for India-Bhutan relations even if the fear of India meddling in internal politics of Bhutan may continue at the grassroots level in some form or other. India will need to establish linkages with all political forces in Bhutan to bring development and prosperity to the people in the Himalayan country and cement ties between the two countries further.

About the Authors

Dr Nihar R Nayak is Research Fellow at Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses

Rajrajeshwari Singh is Research Intern at Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses

Dr Ashok K Behuria is Senior Fellow at Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses

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