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The Election Commission of Bhutan officially announced the schedule of National Assembly Elections.

As laid down in the Constitution the election will be in two stages. In the first stage, two of the four parties who poll the maximum in the election to be held on 31 May will be chosen for the second stage to be held on July 13.

Besides the ruling party DPT and the opposition PDP, two other parties are also in the fray. They are the DCT (Druk Chiwang Tshogpa) and the DNT (Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa). One other party BKP (Bhutan Kuen-Nigam Party), though accepted as a political party failed in the preliminary stage of scrutiny as it could not put up representatives for all the 47 constituencies.

Strangely but perhaps rightly for a small country like Bhutan, the constitution and the electoral laws of Bhutan do not encourage political parties in forming a coalition government. In the absence of a coalition government, Bhutan could have the luxury of a small cabinet with the Prime minister fully in charge of governance in all its aspects.

It is to the credit of Jigme Thinley with his ministers that the government had performed well in the last five years.. He had said and it is worth quoting-“the ultimate test of democracy and elected government is how it makes itself accountable to the people for the promises it has made, for those it has kept and for those it has broken.”

If one were to make a report card, he would get an A+.

Democracy has taken deep roots now and the credit should primarily go to former King Gyalpo IV and the present one Gyalpo V. Having followed the events in the last five years, I have seen very few instances where the King had stepped in though both (Gyalpo IV and V) may be giving guidance to the government from behind.

Some analysts have tried to compare the top down democratic experiment in Bhutan to that of Myanmar. In Myanmar the jury is still out while in Bhutan democracy has taken very strong roots and could sustain itself.

I would rather compare the democratic experiment in Bhutan to that of Maldives where both started the “top down” experiment at the same time. While Bhutan flourished, in Maldives a lawfully elected government was toppled, due to machinations of a few recalcitrant security officials and some of those who had enjoyed power earlier and were left out in the democratic experiment.

One cannot but recall the first democratic experiment in Nepal in the sixties when the lawfully elected democratic government of Koirala was dismissed and the whole cabinet jailed!

As a prelude to the elections, an interim government headed by the Chief Justice has been put in place. It was a delight to hear the Chief Justice saying that he and his council would continue with the policies laid down by the previous government without making any major change. Witness what is happening in Nepal where the beleaguered Chief Justice heading the interim government is prevented from taking independent decisions with the four major political parties breathing down his neck!

Before laying down office, Prime Minister Jigmi Y. Thinley made a report of his achievement success and failures to the outgoing parliament. It was a candid report.

He talked of the special bond between Indian and Bhutan that is critical for the well being of Bhutan. I would add that it has been mutually beneficial to both the countries. From the Indian point of view, Bhutan is the least of the worrisome among the neighbouring countries.

Thinley talked about the progress made in poverty reduction and how with the hydro electric projects going on stream, by 2020 the per capita income in Bhutan would be between 5700 and 700 US dollars. All indicators on the social and economic side have been on the upward move.

One persistent problem the country has been facing all through is the “ rupee shortage.” Even the King made a reference to the problem in his speech on the national day. The country was forced to borrow billions of rupees from the Punjab National Bank at a very high rate of interest of 10.5 percent. Surely the Government of India could have intervened earlier which it did much later with the “swap facility” India offered to all the SAARC countries. Some short term measures like import of construction materials, transport etc. was restricted though this would affect the country’s growth.

It looks that the rupee shortage should be over by 2016 or 17 when the three hydro electric projects Punatsangchu I and II and Mangdechu would come on stream as that would give an additional return of 19.63 billion rupees.

The media had complained rather unfairly against the government on the economy, corruption and the government’s dictatorial style of functioning. On the economy I have dealt with the rupee shortage. I cannot however understand why the government should ask a private and expensive unit like the McKinsey to study and improve governance and in the process spending over 430 million Nu! There are enough competent people in Bhutan to do the study and recommend measures to improve governance. Surely one does not need the high profile McKinsey to do the job!

When we see some of the countries in the region drowning in a “sea of scams,” there was only one lone case of corruption on the question of land allotment. I am referring to the Gyalpoinzhing Land Allotment scam where the Speaker and the Home and Culture Affairs ministers were involved. Both the accused have been given prison terms by the Mongar district court promptly.

As for the arrogance, Thinley’s government had an overwhelming majority with 45 of the 47 members in the assembly and yet one could have noticed that the two member opposition PDP did make enough noise in the Assembly. One should see the real arrogance displayed by some politicians in the neighbouring countries of Bhutan where the ruling party does not even have a majority of its own!

It is a great relief to see that the Bhutan government has not talked in the last few months on the question of refugees in eastern Nepal and how “sincerely” they were looking forward to carry on talks with the Nepal government for a “just” settlement of the refugee problem.

Firstly there are very few refugees left and secondly those left are also thinking of opting for third country settlement. So far over 100,000 refugees have been referred to for third country settlement by the UNHCR and the IOM (International Organisation for Migrants). Of these over 80000 have been resettled and it is a remarkable feat for the two institutions to settle such a large number in such quick time. Settlement started in earnest only in 2007.

Of those settled the breakup is as follows. (As of last month)

| | |
|-------------|-------|
| USA— | 66134 |
| Canada— | 5376 |
| Australia— | 4190 |
| New Zealand | 747 |
| Denmark | 746 |
| Norway | 546 |
| Netherlands | 326 |
| UK | 317 |

There are now 38000 refugees left in the camp and the camps have been merged into two- Sanichare and Beldangi. Of these there will still be a residue of 18,000 or more who may not leave. They will be a problem unless steps are taken by Nepal government to rehabilitate them elsewhere.

Of those who have left, most of the refugees are doing well though the older ones miss their homes in southern Bhutan. Attempts are being made to have a network for the NRBs and soon there will be demand to recognise them as “NRB” (Non resident Bhutanese). It is a pity that the Bhutan government is not reaching out to those who long to come back and spend the last days of their life in their familiar surroundings.

There has been no major terrorist incident, except for a bomb explosion on 21st November last year at Sarpang. The perpetrators had left pamphlets claiming to be from the Bhutan United Socialist Democratic Party based in Nepal!

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