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## Bhutan: The tale of Three Secretaries and other Issues: Update No. 108

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Sat, 01/17/2015 - 13:12

**Note No. 731**

**Dated 17-Jan-2015**

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It should be conceded that Bhutan as a young democracy is still on a learning curve and mistakes do happen. There will be teething problems. Except for the entrenched bureaucrats all the rest involved in the administration directly and indirectly like the politicians, parliamentarians, ministers and the National Council members could make mistakes and these should be taken in the stride.

As Prime Minister Tobgay said in his Press conference on the completion of one year and two months, that the government has got the fundamentals of governance correct. This should be more than sufficient for a young democracy.

As it happens in any young democracy, the former DPT government and also the present government found the bureaucrats too assertive and dominating. In due course, the politicians would get the better of the bureaucrats. In India too in the initial stages of independence, the bureaucrats dominated until the politicians learnt the tricks of the trade but unfortunately in the Indian case both the politicians and the bureaucrats joined hands to loot the country! Here is a lesson for Bhutan.

### **The case of the three Secretaries:**

On December 12, the Government of Bhutan sacked three senior Secretaries that included the Cabinet Secretary Dasho Penden Wangchuk, Economic Affairs Secretary Dasho Sonam Tshering and Foreign Secretary Yeshey Dorji and “surrendered” them to the Royal Civil Service Commission for further action. The use of the term “surrender” appears to be inappropriate.

The charges against the three Secretaries included- exceeding their mandate, breaching rules, misusing the institution of a committee of Secretaries, misrepresenting the government and not keeping the Prime Minister informed of the committee's discussions and decisions.

These are serious allegations but if one goes into details it looks that the Prime Minister and his cabinet over reacted. An avoidable controversy was thus created. The Royal Commission has asked for evidence and full details and this placed the PM and his cabinet in a very embarrassing situation.

It all started with an Indian magazine ENERTIA making certain allegations of corruption against the Economic Secretary Sonam Tshering on the appointment of one Bhutan Trading Company as a representative agent of Bharath Heavy Electricals. There were two articles.

Stung by the articles, the Economic Secretary raised the issue in the committee of secretaries and in pursuance of the discussions, the foreign Secretary sent a formal letter to Govt. Of India requesting the latter's intervention.

The foreign Secretary did not inform the Foreign Minister and the Cabinet Secretary did not keep the Prime Minister also informed of the actions taken. In fact the Attorney General advised against raising the issue with a friendly government before verifying the allegations.

This was a small matter that could have been settled and mistakes have been made by the three secretaries in writing directly to the GOI without following the protocol and without informing the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister.

The end result is that the Committee of Secretaries has been abolished and it is hoped the three Secretaries are not handed out dismissals on a minor matter like this. In Bhutan there are only 11 secretaries and to remove three of them on one go on a "breach of protocol" is not an appropriate response!

#### **The King's National Day Speech and the birthday celebrations of Gyalpo 4.**

In the episode on the three Secretaries what had angered the Economic Secretary were the baseless allegations of corruption made against him and this made him go overboard. It is good that the government takes the issue of corruption very seriously before it starts eating into the vitals of governance as it is happening elsewhere.

The King in his address to the nation on December 19 rightly referred to the issue of corruption as the highest probable risk to development. More significantly he pointed out that the greater threat is "ignoring corruption." The allegations made in the Indian magazine should be seen in this context.

The king in his speech also referred to the contributions made by his father Gyalpo 4, in bringing the country from "darkness to light". As

mark of respect, a year-long celebrations are being planned on the 60th birth anniversary for Gyalpo 4, the former King. Prime Minister Tobgay in his address called on the nation to come together in paying tribute to the selfless deeds of former Gyalpo.

An official website has been launched ([drukgyalzipaat60.bt](http://drukgyalzipaat60.bt)) on this occasion and this would contain a photo gallery, a time line of national milestones and other interesting features.

The media in praising the contribution of former Gyalpo 4, made some interesting points. These included

- \* He metamorphosed Bhutan from an “isolated idyllic Himalayan country” to one with well developed infrastructure, transport and connectivity.
- \* Responsible for a smooth and peaceful transition for Bhutan from hereditary monarchy to Asia’s newest democracy.
- \* He introduced the concept of GNH- Gross National Happiness for measuring natural wealth and development as an enduring legacy.

His greatest contribution was perhaps the concept of GNH. Though it was initially ridiculed by many analysts, now it is gaining acceptance in many other countries as an alternative concept on the country’s development.

One cannot but admire the reverence shown by the people even now. Even some necessary amendments to the constitution needed have been given up as it was felt that the constitution given by the former King should not be disturbed too soon!

He was a benign monarch and the only complaint I had and still have is that he could have been more generous to the hapless refugee community that languished in the camps in eastern Nepal.

In another sense perhaps he has been right in not taking them back as most of these refugees have moved to third countries and are doing exceptionally well. Perhaps one day these people who no longer are refugees could come back and contribute to the well being and development of Bhutan!

### **The Economy:**

It is now getting clear that the ambitious programme of achieving 10,000 megawatts by 2020 will not be possible. This would require another 12 new projects to be developed with investment of US\$ 11.2 Billion within the short time of another five years. This is almost impossible. The best the country can aim for will be that by 2022 it could generate 6476 MW. Even this needs heavy investments and the cooperation of GOI.

More serious is the fact that the country showed a growth of only 2.05 percent in 2013 which was lowest in a decade. There was a general

decline in manufacturing, social sector, personal services and in construction sector.

It does not look that serious as is made out to be as the economic situation will considerably improve once the ongoing hydro electric projects come on stream. As has been pointed by some analysts, Bhutan's growth is mainly driven by government expenditure, investment in construction and private investment. All these activities almost came to a halt at the end of the plan period and even the government's expenditure saw a decline of 22.5 percent.

The Government appears to be unnecessarily in a panic mode in forming a "task force" to identify the issues that led to the drop in the GDP to 2.05 percent, when the reasons that are temporary are well known.

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