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One may wonder why Bhutan is moving forward and consolidating its democratic credentials, while Maldives which introduced a democratic constitution at the same time is failing and in fact sliding backwards towards a full scale dictatorship?

One reason given is that the Maldivian constitution has an executive Presidency with all powers vested with the President with almost no checks and balances and therefore the President is tempted to use the powers to his/her advantage. We have seen this happening in Sri Lanka too with Rajapakse running riot. In the case of Bhutan with a parliamentary system of government, the Prime Minister who is the chief executive has many constitutional constraints that prevent him/her from acting on his/her own.

In this particular case, it appears to me is that the real difference is that while in Bhutan, the nation is being guided by the steady hand of the Kings (Gyalpo 4 and Gyalpo 5), in Maldives it is the former President Gayoom who had ruled the country with an iron hand for three decades is still pulling strings from behind to suppress the legitimate opposition.

Peace and stability should be the main pillars for democracy to progress. While this is happening in Bhutan, the authorities in Maldives are under the mistaken belief that stability could be achieved by coercion and suppression of lawful oppositional elements of the regime.

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The Bhutan Democracy Dialogue

Following two elections, it was felt that Bhutan had experienced the “ills of democracy” and there was a need to remove the distrust and disharmony fuelled by partisan politics. To this end, a forum called “The Bhutan Democracy Dialogue” -BDD was inaugurated by none other than the Queen Mother Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck on April 18 at Thimpu.

The BDD is said to be a multi party association with the aim to enable political parties to work together and take a common position that will help consolidate Bhutanese democracy. This, it is believed will help the parties to prevent conflict and regain public confidence.

The general secretary of the ruling party Sonam Jatso said and I quote “We see the danger of the country being divided along party lines. We should not let that happen, not in a small country like ours.”

On the other hand, the Chief Election Commissioner in the same meeting called upon the leaders to become examples of good conduct and behaviour and stand as pillars of integrity and the hope of a principled partisan politics as models for the democratic world.

One gets the impression that there is a fear among many in Bhutan that party politics per se would bring in division and distrust. One does not have to go too far to see that a partyless democracy failed in neighbouring Nepal just as it had in many other countries.

The Economy:

From the projections of both the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, it looks that Bhutan has finally got over the hump after the disastrous showing in 2013.

The credit for the upturn should go to the current regime. As the Minister for Economic Affairs Norbu Wangchuk said, the present government had inherited a seriously troubled economy, serious rupee crisis and a disproportionately skewed trade balance. Since then, there has been substantial investments in hydro power projects, a record level of tourists and public consumption boosted by an increase in wages. The rupee shortage continues but it is manageable now. As a lay man I fail to understand why the Bhutan government should have large reserves in convertible foreign exchange (more than what is prescribed in the constitution) while the bulk of the trade is with India for which more rupees are needed.

The World Bank report projects an average growth of 6.1 percent in the period 2013 to 2017. The year 2014 saw a rise to 5.7 percent from an all time low of 2.05 percent in 2013.

The ADB report sounds more positive and the outlook is for rapid growth as new hydro power projects come in stream. While the current account deficit is substantial reflecting construction imports, large capital inflows and cautious demand management are “expected to sustain a surplus” in the overall balance of payments.

According to the ADB, the economic challenge will be in enhancing agriculture for a more inclusive growth. The share of agriculture in GDP has been steadily decreasing from half to 13 percent in the last decade and further falling to 8 percent currently. Agriculture continues to remain the crucial factor employing 56 percent of the workforce and is still the main source of income in the rural areas. The ADB report acknowledges that the government’s current five year plan identifies agriculture as a key “entry point” to address poverty and to augment economic growth by raising the growth annually from 2.4 percent to at least 4.0 percent.

The Refugee Question:

Towards the end of April, both the Druk National Congress (DNC) and the Bhutan National Democratic Party (BNDP) had jointly called for repatriation of the Bhutanese refugees with “honour and dignity.”

My question to them is- Where are the refugees when almost most of them have already left eastern Nepal or are in the process of being settled abroad? With the camps almost shrunk to just two and left only with those who are unwilling to be settled abroad, I see no point in harping on the repatriation with honour and dignity etc. True the refugees not only lost their belongings but also their dignity and honour while in the camps- why revive them now when most of them are happily settled? Where is the time for Nepal with its political uncertainty and coping with the enormous tragedy of the April 25 earthquake, to re engage Bhutan to find an amicable solution?

The better thing to do as Dr. Dhakal is doing is to perpetuate the memories of those who languished in the refugee camps for years by way of a museum and work on “networking” to ensure their welfare and to retain their cultural past to the extent possible in far off shores.

The other demand of getting the citizenship certificates to some 28,000 Lhotsampas and 10,000 individuals from other communities whose applications are pending with the government for quite some time is a genuine and a just one that should be pursued.

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