



NEW BEGINNING:

Tshering Tobgay of People's Democratic Party (PDP) won the historic Bhutan election and assumed office of Prime Minister in July 2013

Bhutan Elections July 2013 were quite an intriguing round of affairs with respect to the controversy that fuelled through the ongoing spat between leading political parties in Bhutan. The wild card that triggered a storm in the media was due to an announcement made by the India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) as regards the withdrawal of subsidies *i.e.* kerosene oil, Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG), excise duty refund. As the subsidy is much likely to be reinstated and some solutions do seem in the offing, nevertheless, the whole issue did create political ripples in the landscape of Bhutan and India. Some critiques have termed the subsidy withdrawal by the Indian government as an ill-timed affair. It has been considered to be a policy lapse on the part of India, whilst many have pointed out that the step propagates the first cracks between India-Bhutan relations. The move has been interpreted as a reactionary response of Former Prime Minister, Jigme Thinley's cosiness to China.

It may be noted that in the election, the Opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP) unexpectedly defeated the ruling party Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT), or Peace and Prosperity Party, by winning 32 out of 47 seats.



DEMOCRACY IS THE WINNER IN **BHUTAN**

Bhutan, a country which takes pride in defining itself on the parameter of Gross National Happiness, has shown signs of unhappiness, evident from the parliamentary elections held in July. How does India figure here? ROOMANA HUKIL attempts an answer

The PDP's victory was significant as it had only managed to win 12 seats in the primaries that were held in May. At that time, the PDP secured just 32.5 per cent of the votes, against the DPT's 44.5 per cent. This was the second poll in the Himalayan kingdom, where democratic elections were held for the first time in 2008. In the previous election the DPT had registered a landslide victory, winning 42 of 47 seats in the National Assembly (Lower House).

However, post the 2013 election fervour in Bhutan, several conduits have emerged and this article delves into discussing such political entanglements that have discourses from the selection process. This year, the Bhutanese National Assembly elections had four major political parties that contested against one another—the PDP, DPT, Druk Nymrub Tshogpa (DNT) and the Druk Chirwang Tshogpa (DCT). Of these four, the DPT ran as the major opposition party, for nearly five years. Thus, the victory of the PDP was, a watershed moment in several ways for Bhutan.

Bhutan has two rounds of elections, the first round *i.e.* known as the primary round. In this round, all the parties that have got clearance from the Election Commission can contest the elections. This is the elimination or qualifying round before the final round—where only two parties with the maximum number of votes can contest the remaining elections. In the primary round, the PDP secured a total of 93,800; DPT got 68,550 votes; DNT got 36,000 and DCT got 12,500 votes. In terms of percentage, PDP bagged 44 per cent,

DPT 32.5 per cent, DNT and DCT got 17 per cent, 5.9 per cent, respectively. The total voter turnout in Bhutan, despite rains and heavy storms, was 55 per cent which was 10 per cent more than the National Council Elections that were held in April.

In the primary round, the PDP received a clear win against the DPT by bagging votes in 12 constituencies. This is ironical when compared to the first parliamentary elections that were held in Bhutan in 2008. The PDP, then, only secured two seats of the total 47 seats. The *raison d'être* for DPT's loss to the PDP in Bhutan was that the Bhutanese respondents waited for a party that promised development a new shape. As evident, the people of Bhutan now want a path-breaking change within the country for which reason they chose the PDP over the DPT. As the PDP's policy aspects manoeuvred a greater sense of development within the foresight of Bhutan's architectural scheme.

Another fact that helped the PDP garner greater votes was that—in the second round, the swing votes of the DNT went to the PDP. After the primary round, around 8 DNT members headed by the party premiers marched into the PDP. This gave a clear edge to the PDP in East Bhutan to win, thus, widening the gap between the DPT and the PDP even further.

Essentially, East Bhutan played a vital role in the Bhutan elections. This was, primarily, because of the controversy that involved India being, directly, responsible for the PDP's victory – which is untrue! The PDP's victory is attributed to domestic politics whereby drawing neat cor-

relations between the PDP's victory and India as a factor.

Why the DPT lost to the PDP?

First, there was the factor of anti-incumbency that played a vital role in the 2013 elections. The DPT's political record in the past five years was witnessed by favouritism, thus, being the most widely associated catchword with the DPT. Many reports in the media highlighted cases of President Thinley's and other DPT political heads being roped up in various corruption activities such as land scam, lotteries, favouring communal ties, policy issues, etc.

Second, there was a special emphasis on the land bill. The land bill was important because it was initiated by the DPT. The preposition included gifting land by the elected men to the mascots or the King. While this was considered a special privilege that could be done but by some quarters it was disregarded. This led to a slight amount of friction between the monarchy and the DPT members with regard to the tradition, thus, creating a heavy impact amongst the people of Bhutan at large.

The *third* factor was the rupee crunch. With the rupee crunch, the DPT's policies were beginning to be questioned one after the other. The DPT was seen to be focusing too much on imports, outsourcing, and capital expenditure that led to money outflows, etc. These cases deemed controversial in Bhutan's domestic political structure.

Another factor that led to PDP's victory is that of the leadership provided by the opposition leader—Tshering Tobgay.



DIPLOMACY



FRIENDLY NEIGHBOURS: (Left) Bhutan's King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck being received by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, (top) Bhutan's king with his wife

In 2008, the National Assembly debates, despite, a very weak opposition *i.e.* with two members, was quite unlikely to sustain. The tenacity of one man, Tshering Tobgay, soon became a popular figure on the social media platforms. He came out clearly against DPT'S policies in the public domain on social and economic issues. These debates educated the common man of Bhutan about the fault lines with respect to the DPT's policies and soon Tobgay enthused the youth by continually voicing their concerns.

The last factor—demographic benefit—favoured the PDP. Since, a maximum number of voter's reside in Southern Bhutan; given its habitable conditions—Topgay stressed on repeatedly voicing the concerns of the Southern Bhutanese populace. The PDP, thence, garnered votes from the South and its people wanted change in DPT's policies. Given that the industrial wealth of Bhutan lies predominantly in South Bhutan, it does carry political and economic weight. And here, India's role will be loomed in every now and then, considering that it is one of the largest developmental partners of Bhutan. Viewed thus, the role of the people from the southern region will also play a vital role in India—Bhutan relations in the longer run.

The India factor

With regard to India's role in the PDP's victory and DPT's defeat, many analysts have identified a positive relationship between the two. Of the two explanations that are proximate to India's policy behaviour, the first emerges from the efficacy and role played by the Bhutanese King. Is the King just a symbolic, detached player in the political affairs of Bhutan? The answer is no! Since, Bhutan is the top most priority for India; it goes without saying that the

Bhutanese King must have been consulted before the subsidy withdrawal. Given the fact the timing of the decision was crucial, the time proved to be very sensitive as elections were about to take place. If the King was consulted for approval on the cut of subsidies, then New Delhi cannot be entirely blamed. All told, there was some friction between the monarchy and the DPT. Thus, there was more to see in the episode than just blaming India to be playing a spoiler's role for the DPT.

As regards the Sino-Bhutanese ties, Beijing's latest policy initiative towards Bhutan leads us to believe that the negotiations on the disputed border area are almost settled. In simpler terms, Bhutan-China border relations are settled and Bhutan has agreed to surrender the patches of its disputed land area in the north-western frontier to China. China feels that f New Delhi has intentionally withdrawn subsidies from Bhutan in order to aggravate the Himalayan country's economic plight. China thus thinks that India is interfered in Bhutan's recent elections and attempted to prevent the recently developing ties between Beijing and Thimphu from consolidating further.

As for India, Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh flashed a congratulatory message post the election results to the leaders of the PDP. India acted quickly in applauding the victory of the electoral democracy given the belief that India fails to leverage its foreign relations with its neighbouring countries. As it is, the best managed relationship is between India and Bhutan when compared to the other South Asian states. However, many analysts now see India—Bhutan relations to be deteriorating since the past few years. India and Bhutan did pull the cord when India made the 'mis-step' of cutting the subsidies in the midst of the parliamen-

tary elections in Bhutan. The withdrawal of the subsidy during the elections was a signal that invoked the electorate of the likely economic challenges that Bhutan would face in a scenario where relations with India seemed souring.

However, the victory of the PDP in Bhutan has raised significant hopes of an early settlement of the subsidy withdrawal of LPG and kerosene by India. Many attributed the cutbacks by the Indian government due to the dissatisfaction of the DPT led government. Indian withdrawal of subsidy to Bhutan raised a major question on the overall strategy by the Government of India to subtly pressurise Bhutan to vote out the DPT. India sought projecting the PDP, a pro India party, to victory. But due to political polarisation in Bhutan, Indian interest to reflect a general trend across the region has only festered greater political divide between India and the other South Asian states—with a pro and anti India stride. India needs to negotiate on the subsidy settlement front with Bhutan in order to balance the high politics and its position in South Asia.

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