

Bhutan — Va-PoReg Country Report

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11/11/1865 Start Autocratic Monarchy: While Bhutan before 1907 does not meet the formal criteria of a hereditary monarchy, it can be convincingly placed within the broader conceptual category of monarchically structured sacral rule. The country was governed through a dual system (chösi nyidhen) established in the 17th century by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, in which political and religious authority were formally divided but unified in spiritual terms under the Zhabdrung Rinpoche. Though not a dynastic monarch, the Zhabdrung embodied both sacred and temporal authority, serving as a symbolic sovereign whose legitimacy shaped the entire political order. After his death in 1651, effective power fragmented among regional elites, particularly the Penlops and Dzongpons, yet the system retained its theocratic foundation. The Je Khenpo and Druk Desi governed in the Zhabdrung's name, and political legitimacy continued to rest on religious authority rooted in the Drukpa-Kagyü tradition of Vajrayāna Buddhism. While there was no centralized executive or dynastic succession, the structure remained hierarchically ordered and sacralized, resembling monarchic rule in symbolic and functional terms. Bhutan's pre-1907 regime was thus a premodern theocracy with monarchic features, distinct from modern theocratic systems like Iran or Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, which are ideologically centralized and programmatically enforced. The Bhutanese system was fragmented and tradition-bound, with legitimacy drawn from spiritual continuity rather than revolutionary ideology. Only with the enthronement of Ugyen Wangchuck in 1907 did Bhutan become a centralized hereditary monarchy. From then on, political power was dynastic, unified, and increasingly autocratic. Yet the earlier system, despite lacking formal monarchy, clearly exhibited monarchic elements through its sacral authority structure, symbolic leadership, and hierarchical organization. Bhutan fought with the British in 1864-65 over the so-called Duars region at the southern foothills of the Himalayas. Losing the war, the local rulers of Bhutan „Druk Desi“¹ ceded part of the territory (Sikkim, Assam and Bengal) to the British rulers, which became part of British India, in the framework of a treaty signed at Sinchhula on 11/11/1865. However, Bhutan was compensated by the British and its rulers retained full sovereignty (Gallenkamp 2011). Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. For the relevant period, V-Dem's JCE indicates that judicial constraints on the executive were moderate. Simultaneously, V-Dem's LCE shows no value, which, with appropriate caution, can be interpreted as an absence of legislative constraints on the executive.

12/17/1907 End Autocratic Monarchy/Start Autocratic Monarchy [semi-sovereign, external affairs under United Kingdom, Electoral Oligarchy independent country]: On this date, a monarchy was established as the Kingdom of Bhutan, unifying the country under the control of the Wangchuck dynasty who was chosen as the hereditary ruler (Gallenkamp 2011).² Although Bhutan remained an autocratic monarchy, the establishment of the Wangchuck dynasty in 1907 constituted a regime change in the form of a strategic restructuring insofar as it fundamentally altered the executive selection rule and centralized authority in a hereditary ruler, replacing the previous non-dynastic, sacralized power structure. In this time period, the monarchy of Bhutan came under de-facto guardianship of British India (Mehdi 1988). On 01/08/1910 the British tutelage over the Kingdom of Bhutan was formalized by a treaty in 1910, according to which the Bhutan rulers agreed that the Government of India (back then under British direct rule as British India) oversaw Bhutan's foreign relations. In return, the Kingdom of Bhutan received guarantees of protection from the north. By this agreement, the British

maintained their influence in the region, towards China (Mehdi 1988). This period is coded as protectorate, since there was a consensual treaty in effect that allowed the British a substantial influence of the Kingdoms' foreign relations in exchange of protection. After India attained formal independence in 1949, it signed a new treaty of friendship with Bhutan on 08/08/1949, that affirmed Bhutan's independence but at the same time restricted Bhutan's status as an independent and sovereign state (Crawford 2006) and in which Bhutan agreed „to be guided by the advice of the Government of India in regard to its external relations” (Crawford 2006).³ Scholars are generally divided upon the status of Bhutan's sovereignty in presence of this agreement because Bhutan has delegated a certain degree of influence over its foreign relations to India. For example, Bhutan cannot establish diplomatic relations with another country without the consent from India (Mehdi 1988). However, from 2007 on it is undisputed that Bhutan is a fully sovereign country. The process of political liberalization in Bhutan was unique. It was deliberately initiated by the monarchy to transition from absolute to constitutional rule. Key steps included establishing the National Assembly (Tshogdu) in 1953 and the Third King's 1969 decree empowering the Tshogdu to vote no confidence against the monarch. The process accelerated under the Fourth King, who introduced the philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) and voluntarily relinquished executive power to a Council of Ministers in 1998. The transition culminated in the king's abdication in 2006, paving the way for the adoption of the first constitution in 2008 and the establishment of a parliamentary democracy.⁴ The National Assembly established in Bhutan in 1953 did not constitute a parliament in the sense understood by modern political science. Although it bore the formal designation of a legislative body, it lacked the defining features of a true parliament: its members were not directly elected, it did not exercise independent legislative authority, and it did not function as a site of representative deliberation or executive oversight. Rather, its purpose was consultative, providing the monarch with advice and a controlled form of elite input. It served primarily to legitimize royal authority and to stabilize governance by incorporating local notables into a centralized political framework. From the perspective of contemporary regime analysis, it must be classified not as a genuine parliament, but as a symbolic and instrumental institution subordinate to monarchical power. According to our observations, no multiparty legislative and executive elections were held until 1953. From 1953 onwards, only non-legislative elections were held in this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Per FH's scoring for the period between 1972 and 1977, the country is classified as partly free with a score of 8, which we categorize as rather not free. Between 1978 and 1988 Bhutan scores from 9 to 10 as not free, which we categorize as rather not free. From 1989 onwards a score between 11 and 14 makes the country not free, which we also place in the not free category. V-Dem's PCLI classifies political liberties as absent until 1952, not really present from 1952 to 1999 and as ambiguous from 2000 to 2007. For the entire time political liberties are absent according to LIED. Between 1907 and 2004, based on Polity5's assessment, the executive operated with unlimited authority, facing no institutional checks on power. From 2005 to 2007, as per Polity5's categorization, the executive experienced minimal limitations on decision-making, placing it in the first intermediate category. From 1908 to 1951, V-Dem's JCE indicates that judicial constraints on the executive are moderate. Simultaneously, V-Dem's LCE shows no value, which, with appropriate caution, can be interpreted as an absence of legislative constraints on the executive. For 1952, V-Dem's JCE indicates that judicial constraints on the executive are robust. At the same time, V-Dem's LCE shows no value, which, with appropriate caution, can be interpreted as an absence of legislative constraints on the executive. From 1953 to 1997, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent. For 1998-2007, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were limited. For the year 2008, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were comprehensive, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were robust.

03/24/2008 End Autocratic Monarchy/Start Constitutional Monarchy: Pursuant to a royal decree issued in June 2007, the first general elections to the new 47-member National Assembly – the lower Chamber of the parliament – were held on this date. They followed elections to the newly created upper chamber – the National Council – held in December 2007 and January 2008 (Gallenkamp 2011, Crawford 2006).⁵ There is a dispute if Bhutan is in recent years a - democratic - ceremonial monarchy or a ruling constitutional monarchy. In March 2008, the first general elections to a newly established 47-member lower chamber of the parliament held. In the third National Council elections, 20 members (again, all independents) were elected in single-member constituencies on 04/20/2018. Five more members were appointed by the king. Two rounds of elections for Bhutan's National Assembly were held on 10/15&18/2018. The 47 seats were contested by four parties in the first round, with the two parties that won the highest number of votes progressing to the second round. In the second round the Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT), led by Lotay Tshering, won 30 of the 47 seats with 55.0% of the vote against the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT; Bhutan Peace and Prosperity Party), led by Pema Gyamtsho, which gained 17 seats and 45.0% of the vote. Turnout was 66.4% in the first round and 71.5% in the second. Bhutan's first formal constitution came into force on 07/18/2008, after a period of almost seven years of planning. Executive power is vested in the Council of Minister.⁶ Bhutan functions as a constitutional monarchy featuring executive, legislative, and judicial branches. The Druk Gyalpo serves as the head of state but is required to step down upon reaching the age of 65. While females are included in the line of succession, a male heir takes precedence, even if younger. The parliament consists of two chambers: the upper house, National Council, comprises 25 members (20 elected and five appointed by the king), and the lower house, National Assembly, has a maximum of 55 members (47 members as of March 4, 2020), elected through single-member constituencies. Both houses have five-year terms, but the National Assembly can be dissolved early in the event of a political impasse, requiring a two-thirds majority from its members and the monarch's concurrence. The monarch can declare a state of emergency for up to 21 days, with an extension requiring a two-thirds vote from Parliament in a joint session (Lansford 2021:172). Bhutan is a borderline case between a constitutional monarchy and a ceremonial monarchy, in this case namely an electoral democracy. Policies and legislation are mostly determined by elected officials; however, the monarch still has considerable influence.⁷ In the 2023-2024 parliamentary elections, the People's Democratic Party won the majority, securing 30 out of 47 seats on the national assembly in a fair and free election that is becoming increasingly competitive. Voter turnout was at 65%.⁸ However, despite notable democratic institutions, the monarch retains its special prerogatives. According to LIED multiparty executive and legislative elections were held. LIED still identifies political liberties as absent, while V-Dem's PCLI indicates that they have been somewhat present since 2008. Between 2008 and 2012, based on Polity5's assessment, the executive's power was noticeably limited but not substantial, fitting Intermediate Category 2. From 2013 to 2017, according to the Polity5 indicator, the executive faced substantial limitations on decision-making power. In 2018, the executive's power was limited to a degree between substantial constraints and parity with other institutions, fitting Intermediate Category 3. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating comprehensive constraints on the executive. Per FH's evaluation for 2008 to 2023, the country scores from 6 to 9 as partly free, which we categorize as rather free. In 2024, FH reached a value of 5, which is considered free. We continue to interpret this as rather free.

Constitutional Monarchy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional sources (Lehr 2001, Rizal 2015, Savada 1993)

Notes

¹ The Druk Desi was either a monk or a member of the laity—by the nineteenth century, usually the latter; he was elected for a three-year term, initially by a monastic council and later by the State Council.

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12641778>

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12641778>

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhutanese_democracy

⁵ http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/arc/2035_08.htm; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12641778>

⁶ https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Bhutan_2008?lang=en

⁷ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/bhutan/freedom-world/2023>

⁸ <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/bhutans-2024-elections-economic-complexities-and-regional-dynamics>

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