

BHUTAN

MINUSCULE MEDIA, CRITICAL CHALLENGES

Bhutan held its third democratic elections in 2018 and a new party promising to support a vibrant Bhutanese media was elected to form the country's third ever government.

The centre-left Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT) won 30 of the 47 seats in Bhutan's National Assembly in the September-October election, taken to victory by its leader, 50-year-old urology surgeon Lotay Tshering, on a platform of "nation building".

The tiny country of 800,000 people, wedged between China and India, is widely known for its Gross National Happiness index, but is today facing more serious battles with inequality, high foreign debt to neighbouring India, as well as youth employment, rural poverty and criminal gangs.

2018 also saw the Election Commission of Bhutan tighten regulations for both traditional and social media even as Bhutanese media, especially private entities, continue to be plagued by financial and professional issues.

Bhutanese newsrooms are getting younger due to older and more experienced journalists quitting their jobs for professional and financial reasons. Although Bhutan practices a liberal licensing policy for media, quantity-wise, newspaper houses have dwindled from a high of 12 in 2010 to just seven newspapers today. The main reason for the shutdown was and continues to be financial sustainability. *Druk Neytshuel* a Dzongkha language newspaper folded up in 2018 due to financial reasons. Dzongkha papers have a niche readership and face more severe financial challenges than English newspapers.

Most newspapers are concentrated in small urban centres and the highest circulation does not even add up to 10,000 daily; *Kuensel*, the most widely circulated newspaper estimates a daily circulation of 8000. Since sales are negligible, media houses still rely mainly on government advertisements to survive.

Self-censorship continues to be an issue with Bhutanese journalists. The fear of repercussions inhibits most practising journalists. Bhutan, with a total population of just over 800,000 people, suffers from a 'small society syndrome' as everyone knows everyone else so most Bhutanese including journalists fear social ostracization and being isolated in a close-knit community.

Unfortunately, media literacy is fairly low in Bhutan. The Journalists Association of Bhutan (JAB) launched media literacy and advocacy in 2017, and it was revealed that some participants had never seen a newspaper.

The use of social media is growing exponentially with the increase in mobile phone users. *Kuensel* reported in July 2018 that Bhutan has close to 100 percent cellular subscription. Almost 33 percent of the population uses Facebook while a growing number uses chat apps like WeChat.

The issue of fake news confronts Bhutan too. Much needs to be done to educate Bhutanese about fact-checking and verification. Over the last few years, social media has been the go-to for "breaking news." There is even a Facebook group by the same name with more than 75,000 members. The group sees amateurish citizen journalism that often results in insensitive sharing of graphic accident images and other inappropriate material.

Bhutanese voters cast their ballots in Thimpu on October 18, 2018. The country, famed for its Gross National Happiness index, held its third democratic election since the end of absolute monarchy in 2008. The new government faces serious battles with inequality, high foreign debt, rural poverty and criminal gangs. CREDIT: DIPTENDU DUTTA / AFP



Kuensel reported in October 2018 that social media-related complaints topped the number of complaints to the Election Commission of Bhutan.

TIGHT REINS

The government of the day, Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT) has not attempted to control Bhutanese media so far, but the new Prime Minister Dr. Lotay Tshering did make a comment about Bhutanese journalists not asking "good" questions at his government's first "Meet the Press" event in December 2018. Journalists meet ministers of the government once a month – a legacy of the first democratically elected government — at "Meet the Press."

The DNT went on to institute a "Friday Meet / Meet the PM" session where journalists meet a selection of cabinet ministers once a week. Some journalists feel this is another version of a press release. This may have begun with good



and Media Officer of the Department of Information and Media. However, the country's first media council has not met even once since its institution. A Secretariat is supposed to be created for the Media Council, but this is currently still in the works. Only civil servants will be part of the Secretariat. Although there has been criticism about this being largely government-dominated, many journalists feel it will enjoy greater independence than the BICMA due to journalists being part of the council.

ATTACKS AND HARASSMENT

The lower house (National Assembly) elections took place in the latter half of 2018, with the new government being elected in October 2018. The election period was, as usual, rife with reports of anti-campaigning and mudslinging. Unlike other times, the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) appointed a media arbitrator responsible for ensuring media coverage and advertising according to Election Commission rules.

There were several interventions by the media arbitrator of the ECB of which the harshest was the suspension of a managing editor of a private newspaper for a month for running the profile of a political candidate although ECB had verbally asked them not to. The chief editor of the paper however did ask the ECB to state the specific provision of the Elections Rules and Regulations of the Kingdom of Bhutan 2018 they may have violated, but there was no clarity on ECB's end.

There were less severe instances of intervention with the functioning of national broadcaster, Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS) and national newspaper, *Kuensel*. According to the JAB, the role and powers of the office of the media arbitrator

Above: With a total population of just over 800,000 people, Bhutan suffers from a 'small society syndrome' and most Bhutanese, including journalists, fear social ostracization and being isolated in the close-knit community. Journalists in the field. CREDIT: JOURNALISTS ASSOCIATION BHUTAN

Opposite: Doctor-turned-politician Lotay Tshering, leader of the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) the new ruling party and incoming prime minister of Bhutan, talks with the media after establishing a lead in the country's third ever election which was held on October 18, 2018. CREDIT: DIPTENDU DUTTA / AFP

need clarity and the pressure on a media house to take action against an erring journalist may constitute overriding the roles of the BICMA.

There was one defamation suit filed against a journalist of *Kuensel* in 2018. The media house did not seek to protect its journalist saying that the suit arose from a Facebook post she had made. The journalist had made a post about child abuse after verification, but the stepmother of the child sued her for libel. JAB had a discussion with its board members to discuss intervention, but did not take any action, as the journalist had not appealed to JAB for help. The journalist ended up paying a fine in lieu of a three-month prison sentence.

A former anchor with BBS who contested the elections shared at a public forum that he was harassed and bullied by the management into resigning. He had shared this while campaigning. This was filmed and widely circulated on social media.

BUILDING CAPACITY

JAB has been active in media support and development despite minimal funding in 2018. There were several months last year when the organization did not have the funds to conduct as



PRIME MINISTER LOTAY TSHERING SAID THE SHERIG CONFERENCE WAS CLOSED TO MEDIA AS PARTICIPANTS WOULD HESITATE TO RAISE ISSUES IN THE MEDIA'S PRESENCE. HE ADDED THAT THE MOST IMPORTANT THING THE MEDIA NEEDED TO KNOW WAS THE CONFERENCE RESOLUTIONS.

many activities as it wanted, but new avenues of engagement were explored. One example was a series of “Monthly Dialogues” with JAB moderating about 14 panels on education, sexual harassment, etc. The participants included ministers, policy-makers, and people related to the topics being discussed.

JAB also organized a gender safety and equality training supported by the IFJ and the Norsk Journalistlag (NJ). Other activities were supported by the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF) including a journalism code of conduct seminar, training in literary journalism, longform narrative and storytelling, and workshops on media literacy in rural parts of Bhutan. The media literacy workshop saw more than 260 community participants involved in the activity.

A rural reporting grant, supported by UNDEF, has also been disbursed., while JAB’s *Occasional Journal: Bhutan Press Mirror, Vol. II* has also been published.

JAB’s annual journalism awards will be held on May 3, 2019, coinciding with World Press Freedom Day, to recognize contributions by individual journalists, including freelancers.

LOOKING AHEAD

In order to prevent political interference at BBS, it is vital that it become a public service broadcaster. There have been government-level discussions but nothing has materialized as yet.

Media literacy campaigns need to be amplified to counter propaganda, fake news, and sensationalism.

A lot has to be done to boost the morale of journalists which is at an all-time low. Anecdotal evidence reveals that many experienced journalists quit their jobs after becoming disillusioned with their management and demotivated at work. Journalists may not have been sent into exile as stated in the World Press Freedom Index 2018, published by Reporters Sans Frontières, a country-ranking that was greeted by intense debate in Bhutan. However, many Bhutanese journalists resigned due to lack of motivation and the feeling that they could not practice “real journalism” in their media houses.

Bhutanese media houses also see very few women in leadership positions. Only *Kuensel* has a female chief editor. She is the only one till date to assume this role. There are several media houses where female journalists are more qualified and deserving, but aren’t even considered. It will be a priority for JAB to enhance gender equity in media houses.

JAB intends to create a community of journalists that supports and motivates each member over the next few years. A legal support system will also be created for journalists to protect freedom of expression.

There appears to be no viable solution at present to address the financial woes of Bhutan’s private media, which remain unsustainable and unviable.