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Thierry Mathou

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Bhutan and Nepal: the Himalayan Kingdoms in the perils of democracy – a regional issue between India and China

Thierry Mathou
Ministère des Affaires étrangères et européennes

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While China and India are embarking on a “strategic partnership”, the stability of the Himalayan states, faced with an unprecedented social and political transformation, is a cause for concern. Bhutan and Nepal, the last kingdoms of the region, are the sole state survivors of an old regional order that has seen the integration of Tibet into the People’s Republic of China and that of Sikkim into the Indian Union in 20th century. These two comparable, but, nevertheless, different monarchies – one being Hindu and the other Buddhist – that had escaped colonisation, were late in opening up to modernity and are involved in an irreversible process that could jeopardise the very identity of the societies that have seen them emerge.

Nepal, a troubled kingdom and victim of a ten-year uprising that hurled it into an institutional crisis, has become the most fragile country in the Indian sub-continent, despite its peaceful past. Bhutan is calmer but is at a turning point in its history. It is looking for a solution to the challenges it is facing, along the lines of controlled reformism. Against a backdrop of under-development, a growing need for democracy, conflict between different regional guerrillas and the rise of globalisation in traditional societies, both countries are confronted with similar challenges.

The King of Nepal, who had suspended the democratic game in 2002 to 2005 by seizing full power, was obliged to restore a parliament within its objectives, due to pressure from the people. This was to prepare the election of a constituent assembly, which could decide on the abolition of the monarchy, which the former Maoist rebels, who had recently entered

the government, were in favour of. The King of Bhutan presented a draft Constitution in 2005 that aimed to transform the regime into constitutional monarchy. Without waiting for the institutional changes that would happen in 2008, he stepped down, leaving the throne to his heir, Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck, on 14th of December last year. This gave rise to a promising, but equally uncertain period for a population largely deprived of political culture.

The coincidence of these events sheds new light on a region, which, from Kashmir to North-East India and across Tibet, is an arc of proven, or potential crises, and in which the two kingdoms are no longer safe havens.

THE MONARCHY

While the Nepalese monarchy is the older of the two, it is also the most threatened. It was responsible for the unification of the country in 1768. It also allowed democracy to be fleetingly introduced between 1951 and 1960 and enabled political parties to become rooted in a sustainable manner. Isolated during the Ranas oligarchy (1846-1951), the monarchy was obliged to give in to public pressure in 1990 for the first time after a period of absolutism disguised by a “basic democracy” system, the *Panchayat*, which involved breathing new life into the Hindu model. Although the king made concessions, he remained the country’s key figure, representing its historical continuity, national pride and religious identity. Several events propelled his decline. The Maoist rebellion refused to be involved with the monarchy and the political parties that were swallowed up by corruption and factionalism convinced people that the regime was primarily responsible for poverty, socio-economic inequalities and the country’s denial of ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity. The assassination of King Birendra and seven members of his family by the heir to the throne on 1st of June 2001, who later committed suicide himself, was a double blow to the monarchy. This assassination took away the sacred aura of a dynasty, which, although born out of divine essence has been decimated by a tragic event and brought in its wake a new sovereign to the throne, Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev, the younger brother of the late King, whose authoritative enticements have led to increased unpopularity. Today, entrenched in his palace, deprived of his duties, including ceremonial ones; the King is living on borrowed time while waiting for the verdict of the ballot box. The postponement of the elections initially planned for June with the aim of forming a constituent assembly, will prolong the transitory period that began on 1st of April with the formation of

an intermediary government in which the former rebels participated. It has not been ruled out that disagreements between the traditional parties and these newcomers will once again perturb the institutional calendar. Even though the monarchy is the only pivot likely to embody the continuity of the state, it does not seem to be in a position to take over at this stage, even if the transition process is already making progress.

It is completely different to the Bhutanese monarchy, which has succeeded in maintaining its legitimacy until now, by anticipating socio-economic changes before they could turn into public protest. Formed in 1907, the only driving force behind the reform since the creation of the kingdom at the beginning of the 1960s is that it occupies the entire political area in a system where the protection of culture, rooted in Buddhist values, served as an ideology. The fourth *druk gyalpo* (“dragon King”), a secular monarch who is almost religiously worshipped, adopted a singular approach that was not exactly devoid of risks for the regime. By simultaneously renouncing absolutism for the country and the throne, he clearly showed his desire to lead the kingdom into a new era. Although more peaceful than its neighbour, Bhutan, it is however, confronted with several problems that could challenge the new regime. The issue of the tens of thousands of refugees, (potentially a sixth of Bhutanese population) settled in the Nepalese camps having left Bhutan during difficult times, is still not resolved despite certain countries, such as the United States, having recently offered to welcome a certain number of them. Although stabilised, tensions resulting from the presence of Indian guerrillas who used Nepal’s territory as a base until 2003 in southern Bhutan are likely to resurface, especially as the appeal of the kingdom remains significant, particularly in demographic terms. Even if the Bhutanese society is less divided than its Nepalese neighbour, it is confronted with issues that are likely to aggravate social tensions and generally increase the political conscience of the population on a variety of matters, including a rural exodus, better education and lifestyle, rapid development of consumerism, expansion of the media, saturation of the public sector incapable of recruiting new degree-holders that an increasingly reduced private sector cannot absorb, and a curbed rise in crime, prostitution and drug consumption.

THE CHALLENGE OF REPRESENTATIVENESS

From a comparative perspective, the two countries are confronted with different issues. Nepal, a social and cultural mosaic, where factionalism of

the political class has brought back the caste system, is looking for an improbable consensus. Bhutan, on the contrary, which is already operating in a consensus culture, inherited from the Buddhist tradition, is looking to invent political pluralism without disturbing its social balance.

The election of a constituent assembly, initially planned for June, but postponed, will condition the political future of Nepal. The fate of the monarchy that could be replaced by a republic is not the only question. Nepal should also form local democratic and autonomous institutions. Clarifying the role and function of the army and changing the social composition of the parliament and administration are also part of the reforms required for creating a politically stable centre that will lay down the foundation for structural reforms that the national economy needs. Despite the number of years that they have been in existence, political parties, including movements of managerial post holders or factions spearheaded by those in pursuit of recognition, generally lack representativeness and have narrow grassroots bases. While the Nepalese society is extremely ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse, the institutions and political class portray a distorted image of it (as if through a broken mirror), a situation particularly aggravated by political clashes that have become the norm. Endowed with a particularly sophisticated social stratification system in which inequalities are openly accepted, Nepal possesses characteristics of a closed society in every respect, where conflicting interests of the aristocracy, army, administration (dominated by the Brahmins) and political parties have hindered reform. As self-proclaimed defenders of minority groups, Maoists are part of Nepal's unfinished nation-building process. Having entered the government, they must now abandon the trends of the mafia to which the guerrillas had succumbed and avoid falling prey to political games. However, they alone are far from possessing the legitimacy and know-how that would enable them to reform the country that runs a real risk of continuing to live on the brink of collapse, as it has done for several years.

As for Bhutan, it has a particularly busy constitutional calendar. Mock elections were organised from 21st of April to 28th of May to educate a population ignorant to the point of not knowing the basic principles of participative democracy, the how and why of voting. Political parties have until July to register. In keeping with the new Constitution, an upper house representing the 20 regions will be elected in October. Ninety days before the elections of the National Assembly (the Lower House), which would be held during the first quarter of 2008, the cabinet will be dissolved and replaced by an interim government run by the Chief Justice. Once elected, the new parliament will formally adopt the Constitution. The leader of the majority party will become Prime Minister, inaugurating a new regime. In

its first months, four rounds of local elections will be organised to form the executive government and assemblies of the districts and villages.

The monarch will maintain the important roles of commanding the armed forces, power of appointment, overseeing the legislative initiative, and power of generally raising any issue not governed specifically by the law or Constitution. Nevertheless, there are still several uncertainties. The new system is supposed to function as a two-party regime based on the British model, with the Opposition party being invited to play a “constructive role”. To the extent where there is no political party, where authorised parties are forbidden to have regional, ethnic or religious chairs, and where there is no opposing culture in Bhutan, it would be interesting to examine the criteria that will establish the Opposition party and the role that it will play in the future government. Those settled in the refugee camps in Nepal, for example, will not be able to participate in the new institutional game, a fact that political parties formed in exile have clearly revealed. Although the King sought to reform society, reluctance to change brought on by the people and the administration shows that the Bhutanese political sphere remains to be formed.

By trying to conciliate consensus and democracy, the monarchy is gambling on the internal changes of society, but without authorising the expression of plurality, this could upset the current balance. While recognising religious freedom, the Constitution will promote proselytism and emphasise the role reserved for Buddhism, the kingdom’s spiritual and cultural heritage, which the state will protect. Although the problem of cultural diversity is not as acute as in Nepal, it will not be recognised in the Constitution, which will concentrate on the Drukpa culture. Based on the assumption that tensions would spread in the kingdom regarding the aforementioned social changes and under the pressure of exogenous factors, we cannot exclude the possibility of the competition to outdo the organisation conceived by the monarchy, which has introduced an innovative democratic game, but that which is full of uncertainty. Although well-suited to the current state of Bhutan’s socio-political development, this vision could only be applied provisionally. In the absence of clear boundaries in terms of power-sharing between the future constitutional parties, it is likely that the problems of its people will be the priority, at least in the first years of Bhutan’s future democracy, which will be a major test for what will follow.

For a long-time forbidden and isolated from the rest of the world, the two kingdoms are no longer sanctuaries. The changes that they are undergoing are henceforth inseparable from their regional context. The instability of Nepal is a threat to the balance of the Indian sub-continent

while the pressures that are exerted on the southern borders of Bhutan are inseparable from the changes that run across northeast India.

Having entered the Nepalese government, former Maoist guerrillas who had established links with most of India's revolutionary movements and whose government had targeted foreign policy, should now come to a compromise with New Delhi, the leading economic and diplomatic partner of Kathmandu. The Nepalese evolution is a cause for concern for Bhutan, which fears the idea of a revolution that is currently unsettling its neighbour's political system. A regional issue that has been largely ignored, that of refugees in Nepal, could become a subject of major conflict between the two countries if the new Nepalese government chooses to exploit the matter.

India, particularly vigilant towards to Nepal and Bhutan, situated in its immediate zone of influence, is wary their direct contact with China, a country that is regularly suspected of wanting to encircle the region. While India refrains from directly taking part in the current changes with its Himalayan neighbours, it still observes attentively to the challenges. Any instability in one of the two countries would bring consequences not only to the regional geopolitical balance, but also on the stability of north India, especially in the north-eastern states ravaged by secessionist movements. As for China, which aspires to the stability of its Himalayan borders to make Tibet its new economic bridge to south Asia, the country should be particularly concerned about uncertainties in the region, especially in Nepal. The Himalayan kingdoms are buffer states and have therefore unwillingly become the main test of regional stability between China and India.