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by

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When Agency Triumphs Over Structure: Conceptualizing Bhutan's Unique Transition to Democracy¹

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ABSTRACT:

There are a few absolutes in political science, but the historical observation that democracy does not just evolve without any form of struggle or demand for it, and the theoretical assumption that countries do not simply embark on the path of transition to democracy without a crisis of legitimacy for the old regime, are closest to being universally accepted. However, this paper will demonstrate how historic precedence can prove theory wrong by analyzing Bhutan's transition to democracy. Assembling the basic assumptions of the most popular approaches to regime transitions, it will be shown that none of them can fully or even partly account for democratization in Bhutan. It will be shown that a paramount centrality of agency rather than structure was the driving force behind a transition to democracy that can very well be characterized as being unique. At least for the case of Bhutan, the long ongoing structure-agency-debate has been clearly decided in favor of the latter.

INTRODUCTION

The history of democracy is a history of struggle. From its early beginnings in the late 18th century up to the present day, it has not simply emerged by virtue or chance. India did not simply gain her freedom 'at the stroke of the midnight hour' in 1947, nor did the Berlin Wall suddenly crumble into nothing on that memorable night in 1989. In almost every nation the people or parts of the citizenry demanded,

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bargained, and fought for freedom and democracy. The desire for participation and representation, the determination to take part in the political process and to influence decisions, the longing for independence and freedom, the urge to throw off the shackles of tyranny and oppression, all were driving motives that mobilized the masses and eventually became forces which so many *ancien régimes* all over the world could no longer resist. In some places change came slowly, at an almost evolutionary pace, in others it came abruptly and at times even violently. However, regardless of the many potential ways that lead to democracy in both political theory and historic reality, one common denominator is and has always been that some form of struggle was involved. Democracy does not simply appear, someone has to demand it in order to initiate change. Democracy is not a universal or uncontested concept, it is not the be-all-and-end-all way by which power is distributed and authority is organized in a given society. Those in power usually like to hold on to it and do not simply or willingly stage a coup against themselves, hence disagreement and struggle evolves, not only regarding democracy itself but also about the shape it should take.

And yet, looking at the Kingdom of Bhutan, this long history of struggle for political change, for democracy, appears so strangely remote. So often romantically referred to as the Land of the Thundering Dragon, Land of Happiness, the Last Shangri-La, Bhutan is country, which, until very recently, has been one of the last absolute monarchies in an age that has not only seen an unprecedented proliferation of democracy, but also a frightening ingenuity of how to rule by authoritarian and even totalitarian means. The character of Bhutanese politics has in large parts been distinct from what scholars expect it to be and know. Various authors, including myself, have attested to this fact, but this difference from what we observe elsewhere has been taken to a whole new dimension by the events that unfolded in Bhutan between 1998 and 2008. Bhutan's transition to democracy has been peaceful, calm, and unflinching. It has been initiated, guided, and executed solely by the king. Given the regional neighborhood's experience with democratization this appears even more astonishing. Its transition and the resulting democracy are probably unique and Senator John McCain is right to "encourage our friends and colleagues to get to know Bhutan better because I think it can serve as an example to many other parts of the world that have either tried and failed or are struggling towards freely electing democratic governments"³.

In order to demonstrate the unique way in which democracy was achieved in Bhutan, the first part of this paper will undertake to reassemble the main approaches by which transitions have been explained in the past. In order to do so I will draw on a number of selected authors whose works I deem exemplary for the main explanatory concepts that account for transitions to democracy. In the second part, these explanations and concepts are put to the test by analyzing them within the context of Bhutan's transition to democracy. Finally, conclusions will be drawn that stress the overall centrality of agency in the Bhutanese process of democratization. In fact it will be made clear that the leadership of one single person resulted in the triumph of agency over structure. This is not to mean that structure does not play a role at all, but agency can shape structure and render the latter's inhibiting factors for democratization irrelevant.

³ Malcolm, Andrew (2008), 'John McCain visits Bhutan, gives tips on democracy', *Los Angeles Times*, 05 December 2008. Available at <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/washington/2008/12/mccain-bhutan.html>. (as of 31.05.2012)

BASIC TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Before starting to look into the different approaches that try to explain transitions, it is important to clarify and define some of the terms that will be used throughout the following pages:

First, the object of investigation will be referred to as political regime, or political system. The latter relates to the “interrelationship of executives, legislatures and judiciaries within a constitutional framework” while regime is used to “describe a wider perspective, taking in methods of decision-making and values underlying the citizen-state relationship” (Bealey, F. and A. G. Johnson 1999: 259). In studies of democratization however, these terms are usually used interchangeable in the form of ‘regime change’ or ‘system change’⁴.

Second, the term ‘transition’ needs proper attention. To start with, ‘transition’ has to be differentiated from ‘consolidation’. The former refers to the period of change in which one type of regime gets replaced by another; the latter refers to the phase after the new regime is in place. As Rustow in his seminal article observed, “the factors that keep democracy stable may not be the ones that brought it into existence” (Rustow, D. A. 1970: 346). While the reasons and explanations for a transition may be the same or similar to the ones accounting for the stability of the new system, they do not necessarily have to. Also, the term ‘transition’ for itself does not indicate at all which direction the change is taking. The idea that “any country moving *away* from dictatorial rule can be considered a country in transition *toward* democracy” (Carothers, T. 2002: 6) has proved to be an illusion. Regime change does not have to result in the establishment of democracy, not only can it produce a different type of authoritarian regime, but change is also no one-way-road. Democracies can as well undergo a transition and regress into autocracies. Only where a transition towards democracy occurs can it be referred to as ‘democratization’. Lastly, transitions to democracy are by no means a homogenous straight-running process. They may differ considerably in time, in their preconditions, and in the intensity of conflict involved.

Third, there exists no common agreement over the exact endpoint of a transition to democracy. For some scholars the transition period ends with the holding of founding elections, for others it ends when the first change of government takes place. For the purpose of this paper I will consider the excellent definition given by Linz and Stepan as relevant:

A democratic transition is complete when sufficient agreement has been reached about the political procedures to produce an elected government, when a government comes to power that is the direct result of a free and popular vote, when this government *de facto* has the authority to generate new policies, and when the executive, legislative and judicial power generated by the new democracy does not have to share power with other bodies *de jure*. (Linz, J. J. and A. C. Stepan 1996: 1)

⁴ For the sake of completeness it should be mentioned that there exists another approach that distinguishes with great detail between the terms of ‘system’ and ‘regime’, where ‘political system’ is actually the broader conceptualized term of the two. Furthermore with regard to the term ‘transition’ this approach differentiates between ‘regime change’, ‘regime exchange’, ‘system change’, ‘system exchange’, transition and transformation. However, this nomenclature has so far not found its way into mainstream transitology. For further details refer to Merkel, Wolfgang (2010), *Systemtransformation - Eine Einführung in die Theorie und Empirie der Transformationsforschung* (2nd revised edn.; Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften), 62-66.

The great advantage of this definition is that although it refers to the end of democratic transitions, it already implies at least some limited degree of stability with regard to the democracy that evolved and that still has to consolidate. Without some form of consensus about the cardinal ‘rules of the game’ a transition can hardly be seen as finished, because transitions to democracy are not merely about the introduction of new sets of institutions and rules, but also about the resolution of conflicts and the accommodation of different interests.

EXPLAINING REGIME CHANGE: SYSTEM, MODERNIZATION, CLASS, CULTURE, RELIGION, AND AGENCY

Evolutionary Universals — Talcott Parsons

To begin with, the most rudimentary approach to explain why regime change takes place is to draw on system theory as it was developed by Talcott Parsons. Accordingly, the fate of nations is prescribed as eventually leading into modernity. They do so by functional differentiation of the system. For this, societies need to develop certain evolutionary universals that enable the system to adapt to a more complex and changing environment. If it fails to do so, it can no longer generate the required output and thus loses legitimacy. For Parsons the “the democratic association with elective leadership and fully enfranchised membership” (Parsons, T. 1964: 353) is one of these universals. Democracy is best suited to fulfil the functions of the political system, to organize society and advance it further, because “the larger and more complex a society becomes, the more important is effective political organization, not only in its administrative capacity, but also, and not least, in its support of a universalistic legal order” (Ibid. 355), the universalistic legal order being another universal in itself. Therefore it follows that systems without the universal of democracy are not only less capable of adapting to the environment and providing societal development, they are also not as efficient. For this reason they sooner or later fail to generate the required output and lose legitimacy. The system comes off balance and will change. Although this is a rather crude description of the Parsonian approach, and its deterministic view can by no means account for many transitions, Parsons made a remarkable true prediction in 1964: with regard to the Soviet Union he predicted “that it will prove to be unstable and will either make adjustments in the general direction of electoral democracy and a plural party system or “regress” into generally less advanced and politically less effective forms of organization, failing to advance as rapidly or as far as otherwise may be expected” (Ibid. 356). However, the universalistic claim of system theory should be rejected and the level of analysis is far too general to account for the actual process of transition. But it has to be recognized that the approach’s notion of legitimacy and efficiency of the political system are of value to the debate.

Social Requisites — Seymour Martin Lipset

While the macro-systemic level of analysis of Talcott Parsons gives only vague ideas about the causes for democratic transitions, another set of approaches building on his systemic perspective gets a lot more specific. Modernization theory focuses primarily on the economic system or rather on socio-economic development as a key variable in explaining change of the political system. It has attracted wide attention especially during the 1950s and 60s and has in recent years resurfaced in the debate with regard to the large number of countries in which democracy could not take hold. Its foundations can be traced to the seminal article of Seymour Martin Lipset in 1959. Based on a minimalistic procedural definition of democracy he seeks to explain why democracy was able to take hold in some countries while not in others.

For this purpose he does not even try to delineate democracies from non-democracies properly, but simply categorizes countries to be ‘more’ or ‘less’ democratic along comparably crude criteria (Cf. Lipset, S. M. 1959: 71-74). He then identifies key socio-economic variables that differ between the two types of regimes. These are split into four categories: wealth, industrialization, education, and urbanisation, all of which are interrelated and together they constitute modernization in Lipset’s conception. Variables include amongst others: GDP per capita, males working in agriculture, energy consumption, literacy rate, enrolment in educational facilities, and per cent of people living in differently sized urban areas (Cf. Ibid. 76f.). From the results of his empirical analysis he concludes “that democracy is related to the state of economic development. Concretely, this means that the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy” (Ibid. 75). The causal chain behind this argument goes as follows: economic development caused by e.g. industrialization leads to an increase in education, which in turn changes the political culture towards more tolerant and moderate attitudes, behaviour, and norms. These are translated by political elites into a more restrained attitude of the government with regard to oppositions. Adding to this is a change in the class- and social structure of a society, caused again by economic development. The lower classes experience an income raise and are no longer existentially threatened, which reduces political radicalism; a broad middle class is evolving that has better access to more education, thus demanding more participation in the political process; and the upper classes in turn are less likely to disregard a growing middle class and to disrespect a more literate and well-to-do lower class, thus being more willing to share power (Cf. Merkel, W. 2010: 72). As a by-product of greater education and raised living-standards, people in a society are more likely to form and participate in “intermediary organizations and institutions which can act as sources of countervailing power, and recruiters of participants in the political process” (Lipset, S. M. 1959: 84). Long before the concept of social capital gained prominence with the writings of Putnam (Cf. Putnam, R. D. 1993: 175), Lipset was already drawing from Tocqueville (Cf. Tocqueville, A. d. 2004: 253) and realizing the importance of a well-functioning civil society. Although other scholars in the tradition of Lipset might have used different variables, thereby altering the causal chain to some extent, the main argument has not only stayed the same, but it has also been attributed some form of universal applicability.

While economic development directly relates to the efficiency of a political system, it is not the sole factor for its stability. Lipset identifies two more aspects, which, though “correlated with economic development” (Lipset, S. M. 1959: 86), are distinct from the factors he listed so far. Legitimacy and effectiveness are major contributors to (and a lack of them causes for) system (in)stability. Though efficiency and effectiveness are both seen as contributing factors to legitimacy, he also distinguishes between a more general, latent support and acceptance for the political system and a more output orientated one (Cf. Ibid. 86-100).

In modernization theory a political system becomes unstable, if it lacks sufficient legitimacy (e.g. due to excessive use of force), if it is not effective (e.g. corruption, nepotism), or if it lacks efficiency (i.e. economic performance). This generally applies to democracies and non-democracies equally. However, non-democracies are faced with a special dilemma: if they cannot provide for economic development the whole system loses legitimacy and becomes unstable. If they succeed in providing economic development the consequences described above come into effect. That in turn puts the political system under great pressure to give in to the new demands of the population. Either way, the system is bound to become unstable and to disintegrate.

Although Lipset reevaluates some of his assumptions later on (Cf. Lipset, S. M. 1994), putting greater emphasis on cultural variables (as done by e.g. Huntington), political culture (e.g. Almond and Verba), and adding a traditional dimension as being conducive to legitimacy (Cf. Ibid. 8-10), he is probably still one of the most misperceived scholars in democratization studies. Many studies of transition that rely on modernization theory took Lipset's 'social requisites' as their 'prerequisites' for successful transitions. Lipset however states that this "conclusion does not justify the optimistic liberal's hope that an increase in wealth, in the size of the middle class, in education, and other related factors will necessarily mean the spread of democracy or the stabilizing of democracy" (Lipset, S. M. 1959: 103). Though he strongly believed in his causal chain, he admitted that these factors are only likely to influence the development and stability of democracy, they do not determine it. Also, he is not that dismissive of historic factors that can influence regime change or explain why certain regimes that have not developed his social requisites became democracies and others that did so remained autocracies⁵. Finally, Lipset was much more aware of the influence of agency than most of those who followed him, and especially in his 1994 article he stresses the necessity to combine the structural requisites with the dimension of agency⁶.

In recent years the focus has shifted somewhat towards other structural factors to explain transitions to democracy. However, since research began properly differentiating between transition and consolidation, modernization theory still plays a prominent role in the latter. In this regard the works of Adam Przeworski and his colleagues were pioneering. Claiming a relationship between development and democracy, they assumed that "either democracies may be more likely to emerge as countries develop economically, or they may be established independently of economic development but may be more likely to survive in developed countries" (Przeworski, A. and F. Limongi 1997: 155f.). The results of their empirical analysis are by now commonly accepted and repeatedly tested by other scholars. They conclude that the "emergence of democracy is not a by-product of economic development. Democracy is or is not established by political actors pursuing their goals, and it can be initiated at any level of development. Only once it is established do economic constraints play a role: the chances for the survival of democracy are greater when the country is richer" (Ibid. 177).

Class and Power — Barrington Moore, Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens

Another set of structural approaches that try to explain democratization focuses on the changes in the social structure and power relations within the society. These approaches are usually of a qualitative nature and thus depart from the quantitative empirical method of modernization theory. They apply a long-term perspective and use comparative historical analysis to develop models of path-dependency that lead to certain regime outcomes.

For Barrington Moore the decisive factor for the development of democracy is the strength of an urbanized middle class. Towards the end of *Social Origins* he plainly states: "No Bourgeois, No Democracy" (Moore, B. 1966: 4218). Though the

⁵ "A political form may develop because of a syndrome of fairly unique historical factors, even though major social characteristics favor another form." Lipset, Seymour Martin (1959), 'Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy', *The American Political Science Review*, 53 (1), 72. Also cf. Lipset, Seymour Martin (1994), 'The Social Requisites of Democracy Revisited', *American Sociological Review*, 59 (1), 16.

⁶ "Whether democracy succeeds or fails continues to depend significantly on the choices, behaviors, and decisions of political leaders and groups." Lipset (1994), 18.

development of a bourgeois middle class can be tied in parts to the arguments of modernization theory, Moore's arguments are not so much concerned with the path of economic development. Instead, based on the strength of the bourgeois class and its coalitions with either the 'peasants'⁷ or the 'landed aristocracy', fundamental dynamics evolve that lead to different regime outcomes, i.e. liberal democracy, fascism, and communism (Cf. Skocpol, T. 1973: 6-8 and 12f.). The importance of the bourgeois class can be found in the fact that it is "a group in society with an independent economic base, which attacks obstacles to a democratic version of capitalism" (Moore, B. 1966: xxi). Though the actual coalition between the bourgeois class and either the landed upper class or the peasants may vary from case to case, it is imperative that the bourgeois impulse is strong enough to eliminate or overthrow the opposing sections of the society. Where this impulse was weaker, it sided with parts of the old elite, which did in fact lead to capitalist market organization, but not to democracy. According to Moore these cases developed a fascist system. Finally, Communism evolved in countries where the bourgeois impulse was weak or non-existent and where the form of commercial agriculture was labour repressive. In any of the three cases Moore stresses the fact that regimes did not simply evolve, but where the products of violent struggle. In the case of democracy a bourgeois revolution took place; fascism was brought about by a (bourgeois) revolution from above, and communism by a peasant revolution.

Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens on the other hand apply a broader perspective than Moore's Marxist approach. They rely almost exclusively on the different power relations within society and the international environment. For them "it is power relations that importantly determine whether democracy can emerge, stabilize, and then maintain itself even in the face of adverse conditions" (Rueschemeyer, D. et al. 1992: 5). These power relations are clustered into three different types. First, the balance of class power within society, which is regarded the most important determinant. Second, the structure and capacity of the state and the resulting state-society relations determine the balance of power between state and society, but also within society. Third, transnational structures of power can not only shape and influence state structure and capacity, but also affect the balance of power within society (Cf. Rueschemeyer, D. et al. 1997: 325). This broader perspective provides for the possibility of additional structural variables (the state and the international environment) to influence the prospects for democratization of a society.

Contrary to Moore who assigned a decisive role to the bourgeois middle class, Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens conclude that it is precisely this class who they expect to be as much opposed to democracy as the upper classes. They admit that the evolving middle class might be responsible for the introduction of parliaments, but it strongly opposed a suffrage extension to the lower classes (Cf. Rueschemeyer, D. et al. 1992: 8; Stephens, J. D. 1989: 1065). For them, the crucial push for universal suffrage, which is seen as a decisive step in democratization, originated from the evolving working class. This demand "promised to include the class in the polity where it could further pursue its interests" (Rueschemeyer, D. et al. 1992: 6). It was able to do so by an "unprecedented capacity for self-organization due to such developments as urbanization, factory production, and new forms of communications and transportation" (Rueschemeyer, D. et al. 1997: 325).

However, though both approaches presented above claim to distance themselves strongly from the paradigms of modernization theory, they cannot ignore

⁷ With regard to importance of the peasantry Moore distinguishes between market orientated and labour repressive organization of the agrarian sector.

the decisive and overriding impact of capitalist development. They might focus on a different consequence of modernization, namely the change in class relations, but ultimately this is triggered by capitalist development, and should not be ignored once it gave the impetus for social change. Another problematic aspect of these approaches is their deterministic claim that the arguments they developed do not only account for the “establishment and the maintenance of formal democracy but are also critical in deepening formal democracy toward more fully participatory democracy and advancing [it] toward social and economic equality” (Ibid. 326). Finally, an aspect, which accounts for a weak spot on the one hand, but at the same time also for a more realistic view has to be mentioned. Both works are careful in asserting universal applicability of their claims to non-western societies. The prime object of their investigation is the development in Europe and, to a lesser degree, in Latin America. Moore already realized that a case such as India can hardly fit the three ways into modernity he envisages (Cf. Moore, B. 1966: xxii and 314ff.). This is a point worth mentioning considering the fact that most transitions in the second half of the 20th and the beginning of 21st century were by no means characterized by the long evolutionary processes that are presented by Moore and Rueschemeyer et al.. More importantly, the momentum of capitalist development that triggered the changes they claim has long subsided. To be sure, capitalist development, modernization in general, and more recently globalization still shape and change societies all over the world, but the defining moment of beginning capitalism and the creative power it had cannot be repeated today, as the configuration of virtually all influencing environmental factors has changed.

Culture and Religion — Samuel P. Huntington

In a strict sense the arguments on culture and religion developed by Samuel Huntington are by no means a coherent approach to the explanation of transitions to democracy. Instead, they just provide an additional explanatory component to the question why so many countries outside the west have not yet been able to develop or sustain democracy. In another sense his arguments can also be traced to the work of Max Weber on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber’s other writings on the sociology of religion in non-western societies and in extension to the class structure based approaches in explaining western democratization presented above.

Huntington identifies eight different civilizations to which he attributes different levels of conduciveness to democracy and its inherent values and norms. He does so in reaction to the rather restrictive formulations of George Kennan, who postulates that democracy is only viable in the western context, as it “evolved in [...] northwestern Europe [...] and was then carried out into other parts of the world, including North America, where peoples from that northwestern European area appeared as original settlers, or as colonialists” (quoted in Huntington, S. P. 1993b: 298). Hence democracy has only a “very narrow base both in time and space; and the evidence has yet to be produced that it is the natural form of rule for peoples outside those narrow perimeters” (Ibid.).

The set of civilizations he comes up with include: Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and African (Cf. Huntington, S. P. 1993a: 25). He observes that the “people of different civilizations have different views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views of the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy” (Ibid.). For this reasons he concludes that western, Latin American and, with some deductions, the Japanese culture are compatible with

western democracy. Slavic-Orthodox, Hindu, and African culture are seen to be very ambiguous with regard to democracy, while Confucian and Islamic culture are described as outright incompatible (Cf. Merkel, W. 2010: 80). This is based in the fact that especially in the last two cultures, the necessary values, rights, and liberties that are required for any definition of democracy, would not only be undermined but also seen as completely illegitimate.

Interestingly enough, in his entire world roundup, Huntington completely ignores Buddhism and the countries that fall in its cultural realm. Only later in his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* does he refer to Buddhism for as much as 17 lines out of the book's 369 pages⁸. For him "Buddhism, although a major religion, has not been the basis of a major civilization" (Huntington, S. P. 1997: 48). Hence, in all his indisputably valuable contributions to the field of democratization studies, the influence of Buddhism is ignored.

The assumptions Huntington made have sparked intense discussions on the subject of religion and culture. Especially with regard to the prospects and actual shape of democracy in Asia, a whole new string of literature appeared since the mid-1990s. Generally, Huntington's conclusions have been rejected by most authors and actually proven wrong by empirical findings. Fukuyama for instance showed "that there is no fundamental cultural obstacle to the democratization of contemporary Confucian societies" (Fukuyama, F. 1995: 32). The dispute about so called 'Asian style democracy' has furthermore enriched the more basic discussion about the meaning of democracy⁹ itself.

Agency and Pacts — Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter

Agency-based approaches towards transitions to democracy perform a decisive shift in perspective compared to all structural approaches. While the latter are predominantly concerned with the question by what factors democratization is caused, facilitated, or supported, and, to a lesser extent, why some regime changes do not lead to democracy but to other forms of political systems, agency-based approaches try to open up the 'black box' of transition itself. They seek to understand more clearly what happens during the process of transition and in what way the choices made in this process influences its outcome. They do so by assigning greatest importance to individual actors or groups of actors that are involved in the process of transition.

For O'Donnell and Schmitter transitions from authoritarian rule are initiated when the incumbents "begin to modify their own rules in the direction of providing more secure guarantees for the rights of individuals and groups" (O'Donnell, G. A. and P. C. Schmitter 1986: 6). The impetus for a regime to open up (the authors introduced the term liberalization for this process) originates from the soft-liners within the authoritarian elite. In itself the separation of soft-liners and hard-liners within the regime is an important step, as parts of the authoritarian elite only splits into soft-liners when they become increasingly aware "that the regime they helped to implant [...] will have to make use [...] of some degree or some form of electoral

⁸ Note that the word 'Buddhism' appears more often, but only in connection to other civilizations and mostly to demonstrate that it is no civilization in its own right.

⁹ Cf. amongst others Hood, Steven J. (1998), 'The Myth of Asian-Style Democracy', *Asian Survey*, 38 (9); Huang, Min-Hua and Yun-Han Chu (2010), 'Solving an Asian Puzzle', *Journal of Democracy*, 21 (4); Lu, Jie and Tianjian Shi (2010), 'The Shadow of Confucianism', *Journal of Democracy*, 21 (4); Tatsuo, Inoue (1999), 'Liberal Democracy and Asian Orientalism', *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights*.

legitimation” (Ibid. 16). The reasons for this realization can be manifold, but O’Donnell and Schmitter suggest that, besides the defeat in war and a succeeding occupation by a democratic country, the factors that cause the initial division of the authoritarian elites can be found predominantly in domestic, internal affairs (Ibid. 18). The authors assert that “there is no transition whose beginning is not the consequence – direct or indirect – of important divisions within the authoritarian regime itself, principally along the fluctuating cleavage between hard-liners and soft-liners” (Ibid. 19). Some form of crisis or perceived crisis that undermines the legitimacy of the old regime has to ‘nibble’ on its foundations, before some actors within the regime elite become aware of the necessity of liberalization in order to react to growing discontent in the population.

The transition itself, a period of great uncertainty (Ibid. 3), is characterized by a “high degree of indeterminacy embedded in situations where unexpected events (*fortuna*), insufficient information, hurried and audacious choices, confusion about motives and interests, plasticity, and even indefiniteness of political identities, as well as the talents of specific individuals (*virtù*), are frequently decisive in determining the outcomes” (Ibid. 5). For O’Donnell and Schmitter, the best way to limit this huge amount of uncertainty is for the regime soft-liners and the opposition to engage in a bargaining process at which end pacts can provide for more predictability and certainty with regard to political action. They define pact as “an explicit, but not always publicly explicated or justified, agreement among a selected set of actors which seeks to define (or better, to redefine) rules governing the exercise of power on the basis of mutual guarantees for the ‘vital interests’ of those entering into it” (Ibid. 39). One important aspect of this definition of pacts is that the actors have their ‘vital interests’ in mind when negotiating about the future shape of the political system. Depending on the relationship and strength of the regime elites or the opposition, this can provide an interesting explanation for the specific setups and configurations of power in newly emerging systems. The actors are seen to be rational, but this rationality is (or can be) restricted by structural factors influencing their room for manoeuvre, or their obligations to the groups they represent. In course of time, the initially elite driven negotiation of pacts becomes more and more shifted towards a mobilized civil society, which in turn requires the incorporation of further democratic demands (Ibid. 41 and 48ff.). Another interesting aspect of this process is that because both sides, regime soft-liners and regime opposition, fear a coup from the regime hard-liners, they both refrain from trying to enforce too radical demands that are perceived as threatening to push the hard-liners or other possible veto powers over the edge. Thereby, the results of pacts are usually of a moderate, tempered nature, which in turn often leads to mutually equitable mechanisms of resolving conflict and dissent in the resulting democratic system (Ibid. 24f.).

Finally, the authors do not claim that this particular process is the only one that results in the establishment of democracy. They are fully aware that it can also be achieved by some form of revolutionary struggle, or, where the regime elites are completely discredited, by an overthrow of the old regime. However, where pacts are a feature of transition, the authors are convinced that “they are desirable – that is, they enhance the probability that the process will lead to a viable political democracy” (Ibid. 39).

TRANSITION IN THE KINGDOM OF BHUTAN

Having extensively elaborated on some of the different approaches to explain transitions in general and democratization in particular, it is now time to shift the focus on the Kingdom of Bhutan in order to seek an answer to the question as to why the country democratized and what shape this process took.

However, before doing so it is imperative to stress that the preceding presentation of different approaches towards transitions is by no means all-encompassing. The myriad of ideas and assumptions makes it virtually impossible to draw a conclusive picture. As Terry Lynn Karl observed, “[w]ith the constant introduction of new causal variables and the multiplication of explanations, various scholars [...] have made heroic efforts to synthesize these debates as well as the range of explanatory factors” (Karl, T. L. 2005: 15). One of the main reasons for this can be found in the fact that approaches in transitology are overwhelmingly derived from empirical observations and “as the variety of democratizations has multiplied, so has the scholarly and analytical literature proliferated” (Whitehead, L. 2002: 2). On the one hand this diversity makes it much harder for scholars to come up with consistent explanations of regime change that can be applied to all cases throughout space and time, on the other hand there is still a great innovative potential in the discipline, and although authors tend to lean towards one of the main currents of transition studies, they are not bound by them. The realization has trickled in that transitions are not monocausal processes, but that there are many factors which can trigger this process and shape its outcome. Over the past 15 years the larger part of literature on democratization has drawn from many approaches and provided a combination of different structural variables and actors’ choices to explain their respective cases¹⁰.

To begin with, let us take a look at some factors that are believed to be crucial to structural approaches that are derived from modernization theory¹¹. Bhutan’s GDP per capita in 2009 was 1,805 US \$, up from 762 US \$ in 2000¹². However, this drastic change probably reflects more the volatile development of general GDP due to hydro power construction projects than a real and substantial increase in the peoples’ income. Its adult literacy rate is merely 59%¹³, though there appears to exist

¹⁰ The theoretical and methodological implications of these endeavors to combine structural and voluntaristic approaches to regime change have been demonstrated remarkably insightful by James Mahoney and Richard Snyder. For further reading refer to Mahoney, James and Richard Snyder (1999), 'Rethinking Agency and Structure in the Study of Regime Change', *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 34 (2).

¹¹ Note that a great problem is posed by a lack of reliable data. Only in recent years have national statistics been more comprehensive. Time series data for most indicators are missing or date back only to the 1980s. Vital social indicators are only collected during the census and household surveys that take place every five years. Unless otherwise indicated, the data provided in this section has been taken from World Bank (2010), 'World Development Indicators', Available at http://databank.worldbank.org/databank/download/WDIandGDF_excel.zip (as of 31.05.2012)

¹² Royal Government of Bhutan (2005), 'Population and Housing Census of Bhutan - 2005', *National Statistics Bureau* (Thimphu). Available at <http://www.nsb.gov.bt/pub/phcb/PHCB2005.pdf> (as of 31.05.2012)

¹³ Royal Government of Bhutan (2010), 'Annual Education Statistics, 2010', *Ministry Of Education* (Thimphu). Available at <http://www.education.gov.bt/Publications/AES%202010%20working%20final%20version%20without%20indicator.pdf> (as of 31.05.2012)

a sharp contrast between urban and rural areas¹⁴ as well as between adults and children. The percentage of people living in urban areas amounts to only 35.6% of the total population. Out of a total workforce of 312,700 people, 204,400 people or 65.4% are employed in the primary i.e. agricultural sector. 11.5% or 36,000 people are employed in the secondary sector¹⁵, and 44,200 people or 14.1% are employed in the tertiary sector. 28,100 people or 9.0% are civil servants or military personal. Regarding the different sectors' GDP share, the primary sector accounts for 21.2%, the secondary for 39.1%, and the tertiary sector for 39.7% of the GDP in 2008¹⁶. Approximately 90% of the population are covered by basic health care, while there are only 171 doctors in the country. 83.2% have access to safe drinking water¹⁷. Its per capita energy consumption amounts to 80.46 million Btu¹⁸. Though Bhutan has made astonishing progress in many development fields (Cf. Singh, S. 2010: 152ff.), it is still listed as one of the 48 least developed countries (LDCs) in the world. However, especially with regard to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Bhutan has "made remarkable strides toward the achievement of the MDGs" (United Nations Development Programme 2010), and its resolve "to achieve [them] is indeed a valuable example for the global community. The government's strategy is a model for other countries on how to successfully implement the Millennium Declaration through a unique development approach" (Ibid.).

The rather good progress in achieving the MDGs may however not hide the fact that with regard to the typical factors that are attributed great importance by modernization theory, Bhutan, as a least developed country, is far from attaining any of the, as sufficient regarded, conditions conducive to the establishment of democracy. The one factor that to some extent meets the criteria set by modernization theory would be education, which has consistently been fostered. Though adult literacy rate is low, one should not overlook the fact that Bhutan has a huge population under the age of 25 (289,708 or 41.6%), and the government's efforts have resulted in a net enrolment rate in primary education of over 93% of which almost 90% reach the seventh grade (Royal Government of Bhtuan 2010). However, as these data relates to 2009 and figures were lower when the actual transition started in 1998, the factor of education could only become important in the consolidation of democracy. The following figures will provide for time series data on GDP growth, GDP per capita, energy consumption per capita, and percentage of urban and rural population.

¹⁴ In 2005 literacy rate in urban areas was reported to be 75.9 %, whereas in rural areas it was only 52.1 %.

¹⁵ According to Bhutanese statistics that includes: mining and quarrying; manufacturing; electricity, gas and water supply; construction; household goods; private households with employed persons.

¹⁶ Royal Government of Bhtuan (2009), 'Statistical Yearbook of Bhutan, 2009', *National Statistics Bureau* (Thimphu). Available at <http://www.nsb.gov.bt/pub/syb/syb2009.pdf> (as of 31.05.2012)

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Us Energy Information Administration (2010), 'International Energy Statistics', Available at <http://tonto.eia.doe.gov/cfapps/ipdbproject/iedindex3.cfm?tid=44&pid=45&aid=2&cid=BT,&syid=1980&eyid=2008&unit=QBTU> (as of 31.05.2012)

Figure 1: GDP growth in %, 1982–2009¹⁹

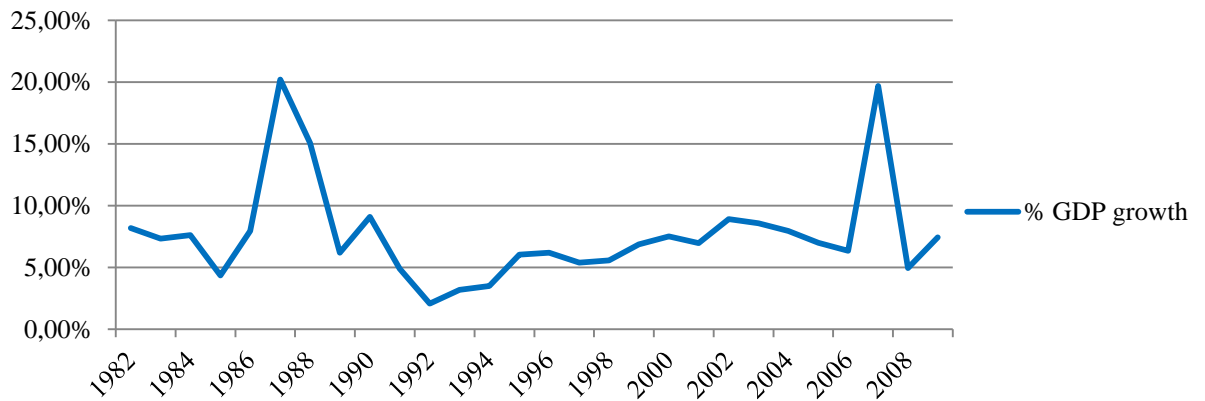


Figure 2: GDP per capita in current US \$, 1982–2009

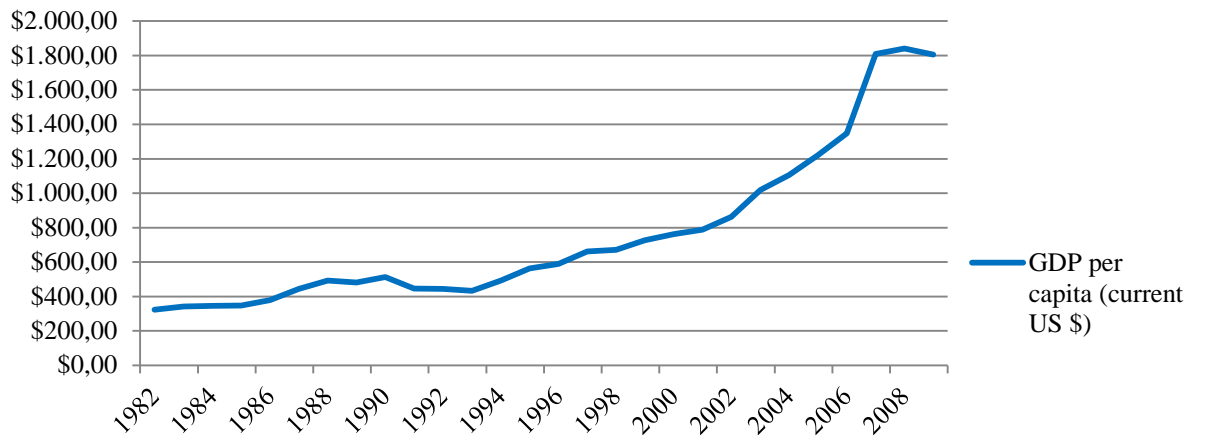
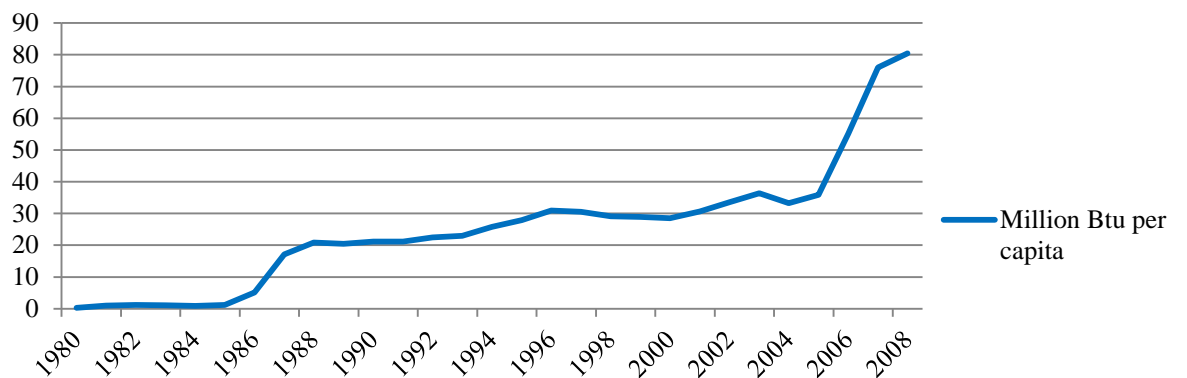
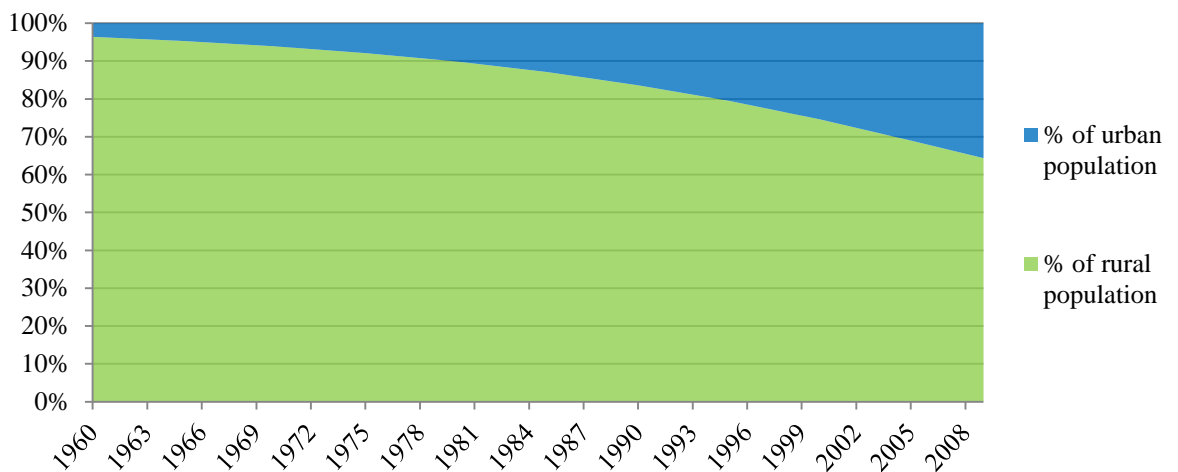


Figure 3: Per capita energy consumption in million Btu, 1980–2008



¹⁹ The following figures are the author's own design and have been compiled using data from the aforementioned sources.

Figure 4: % of rural and urban population, 1960–2009

If one looks at the class structure of Bhutan, the picture regarding the conditions that might trigger a transition appear almost as non-existent as did the socio-economic factors. Not only is the majority of the population employed in agriculture, there also exists almost no noteworthy middle class or working class that could facilitate change in line with the arguments made by Moore, Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (Cf. Sinpeng, A. 2007: 23). Moreover, a landed aristocracy is missing as well as the former feudal system had been removed by the third *Druk Gyalpo* back in 1956. Until very recently, the country's population was almost entirely agrarian in character. Besides this, only a small, comparatively professional bureaucracy exists, which also provides personnel for government positions. However, none of these groups did oppose or demand democratic changes within the system. The last social group with considerable influence that could have opposed or even prevented the initiation of a democratic transition has been the Buddhist monastic bodies. But they had been politically marginalized early during the establishment of monarchy, and later on they were well integrated into the overall system, so that it is nowadays far from challenging the existing political order (Cf. Winderl, T. 2004: 10f.). Modernization in Bhutan took a completely different shape from that in most countries. Instead of massive social transformation, it appears that development came in the form of "change in continuity" (Mathou, T. 2000). Education has been widely expanded with almost all children enrolled in primary and even secondary facilities. Apart from tertiary education there exists almost no gender gap between boys and girls. Education has become universal nowadays, which reflects in high literacy rates of about 80% among the young people. Similar changes, albeit slower, are taking place in the work sphere where the percentage of women is constantly growing. Modern communication and information technology has entered Bhutan and given its extremely different terrain and sparse population density, the growing number of mobile and internet users is not astonishing (the number of mobile phone subscribers has exploded from almost 0 in 2002 to 36.5 per 100 population in 2008; the number of internet users per 100 population has risen from 0.1 in 1999 to 6.6 in 2008). Taken together with the achievement of providing the population with basic needs (universal child immunization has been achieved several years ago; access to clean drinking water has risen to over 90%; proper sanitation is reaching 90% coverage; rural electrification has been massively expanded and will be universal by 2012 or 2013), it appears that Bhutan could embark on a path of modernization, providing its population with the civilizational merits, without causing or at least limiting the negative consequences associated with it. There is no rural exodus but only a slow shift towards the urban areas. Unemployment has remained comparably low as well. Most strikingly, the fact that modernization has everywhere else come

along with, at times massive, industrialization does not hold true for Bhutan. Employment figures and the economy's sectors share of the GDP show that the tertiary sector is growing equally strong or even stronger as the secondary. Bhutan appears to have skipped industrialization and is instead directly developing towards a service society. Though agriculture will certainly remain an important part of the economy in terms of employment, trends indicate that the service sector is growing far more promising than the industrial one. Add to this an on-going surge in education, which qualifies people to work in sophisticated jobs of the service sector and chances are high that this trend will continue in the future.

Regarding cultural variables that would explain Bhutan's transition to democracy it is difficult to make conclusive statements. The relationship between Buddhism and democracy is a subject that has been discussed only rarely. As has been shown earlier, the argument over certain inhibiting factors of specific religions and cultures can always be countered by naming values and norms that would be supportive of democracy (Cf. Bell, D. A. 2008). However, to my view the specific traits that come with Buddhism in Bhutan (Cf. for example Williams, P. 2009) are probably at least as conducive to democracy as western culture is thought to be. "Like Buddhism, modern democracy is based on the principle that all human beings are essentially equal, and that each of us has an equal right to life, liberty, and happiness. [...] Thus not only are Buddhism and democracy compatible, they are rooted in a common understanding of the equality and potential of every individual" (His Holiness the Dalai Lama 1999: 3f.). But democracy is not exclusively about the rights of the individual. Hence, "a system whereby the interests of the individual are balanced with the wider well-being of the community at large" (Ibid. 4) is needed. In Buddhism, this dualism between individual and group rights is well embodied. Together with its tradition of consensual decision making, 'Buddhist democracy' appears not only possible but also viable.

Finally, the question of agency in Bhutan's transition to democracy is palpable. The initiative for democratization emanated solely from the fourth Dragon King. Neither was he compelled to liberalize the system by a growing pressure from the people, nor did he have to react to an existing or perceived crisis. Admittedly, one can hardly know for sure whether he perceived his country to be in a crisis that would require democratization, but all sources available suggest that this was not the case. Also, no external pressure was put on Bhutan to liberalize, neither from its direct neighbours, nor from its donors. In line with the arguments of democratic diffusion theory, it is also implausible that Bhutan's direct neighbourhood had a decisive impact on the king's decision. Only India as a consolidated democracy could have had that effect, but it usually refrained from getting involved into any internal matters of Bhutan and given India's vast diversity, its ethnic, religious, and political conflicts, and its lack of governance in parts of the country, it surely did not even serve as the most viable example for democracy to Bhutan.

Interestingly, the King had initiated the beginning of the transition, not by liberalization as it is understood by O'Donnell and Schmitter, but by strengthening the executive and legislative, thus devolving his own powers and strengthening state institutions. And as there was virtually no opposition to the monarchy, there was consequently no one to negotiate with about defining the new rules of the political system. This unique circumstance made it possible that the new 'rules of the game' could be deliberated on with care and patience and above all without politicization by the drafting committee. Clearly, no pact had to be established to broker the outcome of transition, and, with an apolitical and disengaged public, revolution, system overthrow, or negotiated reform were also out of the question (Cf. Karl, T. L. and P. C. Schmitter 1991: 275). What remains is the transition mode of imposition,

or transition from above. According to the literature, these cases are characterized by regime elites who anticipate the crisis and hope to retain some of their powers, or satisfy the opposition with limited concessions (Ibid. 278 and Merkel 2010: 101), if they allow for reforms. However, most important is the elite's belief in their ability to control this process of liberalization. Generally, this belief has turned out to be a myth, especially once civil society gets mobilized and activated, transitions tend to get out of the control of the old regime's incumbents, as long as they do not resort to violence and repression in a desperate effort to stop the process (Cf. Linz, J. J. and A. C. Stepan 1996). In Bhutan none of this happened. Even when national security was threatened by Indian militants who had sought refuge in the dense forests of southern Bhutan and a surprisingly well orchestrated military operation took place (Cf. for example Gallenkamp, M. 2010: 3), the King did not hold or reversed the process of transition. It would have been easy to cling to his powers and to restrict freedoms by reference to a national emergency.

It appears that the whole process had been long planned and envisioned by the King, as he began to involve the general public in the decision-making process early on in 1981. The refugee crisis might have slowed down his plans, but only temporarily. For more than 20 years before the introduction of democracy, some form of consensual, participatory 'grass-roots democracy' had been nurtured, which in turn made it possible to openly discuss and deliberate about the draft constitution throughout the whole country (Cf. Gallenkamp, M. 2011: 16ff.). These deliberations were no charade to secure support. They had a direct impact on the final version of the constitution and the opinions and concerns of the population left a direct mark on the document (Penjore, U. 2007). Thus, the great uncertainty that is usually attributed to transitions was kept low by reconnecting the process of deliberation about the new system to its subjects.

But what is probably most remarkable in the Bhutanese transition, is the fact that the King abdicated once the constitution was finalized and preparations for elections had already begun. At an age in which some other royals in Europe still wait to ascend to the throne, the King made way for his young son, an Oxford educated Master of Political Science. This should probably make even the harshest critics think twice about the king's motives. The argument that he initiated democratization in order to preserve his powers after he saw what had happened in Nepal simply makes no sense. The path that eventually led to a full transition to democracy had been taken long before the Nepalese monarchy began to crumble. But if one suggests that motives other than his personal self-interests have guided his actions, one reaches the explanatory limits of much of political theory. This relates to two fundamental problems in the study of transitions and especially of authoritarian rule: First, all approaches to regime change regardless of their explanatory models assume that the initial reason for a transition is a lack of legitimacy of the old political system. No matter by what it is caused, without a legitimacy crisis there can be no regime change, because transitions are costly in their transactions and it would make no sense to embark on such a path, if the present regime is already able to satisfy the needs, aspirations, and demands of its subjects. There have to be at least some people within a system that are dissatisfied with the status quo and that are willing to change it. As stated in my introduction, there has to be someone demanding democracy. Second, if political science is often diverse in its approaches to explain certain observations, it shows a remarkable consensus when it comes to one single fact about authoritarian regimes: they may be more or less repressive, they may also grant different degrees of freedoms and liberties to their people, but they are **essentially 'bad'**! This perception underlies much of the study of regime change, and, though it also carries a substantial normative dimension, history has given enough reasons to believe in this inherent 'badness'. However, the fact that

authoritarian regimes have to be bad by nature accounts for many of the problems with which one is faced while working on Bhutan. The Bhutanese system, though certainly paternalistic of its people and at times making questionable decisions (but which system does not?), has been **essentially 'good'**. Its rulers did, to the largest possible extent, rule for the good of the people and not for their own benefit. They did not accumulate unspeakable wealth, nor did they abuse the powers that were vested in them. They appear to have had the greater good in mind when ruling the country. In 100 years of Wangchuck rule over Bhutan, the only thing that distorts the overall image is the Lhotshampa conflict, which appears somewhat antithetical in comparison to the general conduct of politics by the monarchy and its overall commitment to the common good. But while this should certainly not be ignored, it also should not cloud one's view when thinking about the country's transition. More than twenty years after the eruption of that conflict, the decisions of the King and the Royal Government, the historic move towards democracy, and the conduct of democratic politics are still being judged far too often in reference to and on the grounds of the Lhotshampa issue.

CONCLUSIONS: A TRIUMPH OF AGENCY OVER STRUCTURE?

To conclude, one can assert that although authors like Merkel or Linz and Stepan are open to the idea of democratization from above, neither of them imagined a case in which such a process could be carried out completely peacefully. Also, the possibility of a guided system change that is envisioned by the ruler and then executed over a long period as well as pursued with an honest commitment to the wellbeing of the people and the nation, is one which has so far not found any mentioning in theory. Additionally, the intention that provoked this guided regime change clearly differs from usual explanations. While the initiation of a top-down model of system change is usually attributed to mounting pressures on the ruling elite, whether internal or external, the Bhutanese transition has not witnessed any such processes. Internally as well as externally, the King has never been confronted with any serious pressures and he was free to choose the time and path towards transition.

It has also been shown that, despite respectable developments in terms of socio-economic indicators, the set of structural variables derived from modernization theory, does not provide for an explanation of Bhutan's transition to democracy. If at all, one would expect them to have an inhibiting influence. But this has not been the case. Bhutan succeeded in its transition even though it is one of the least developed countries in the world. Another set of explanations, the power structure within society, does not yield any better results. In the absence of a credible middle class or working class, the respective approaches to regime change cannot explain the Bhutanese case either. The question of agency has also been discussed and the result is more than obvious. Whether the king's choices were constrained by structural factors is hard to say except for culture and religion, which certainly influenced the King's ideas of a 'good society'. These two factors certainly played an important role, but to understand them as constraints is probably not the right way. Instead one can assume that the underlying principles of Buddhism played a facilitating role in so far, as democracy was not perceived to be threatening or not suitable for the country.

As regime change is always being conceptualized as a reaction to or consequence of the deligitimation of the status quo, theories of regime change build on that fundamental assumption. Thus, an explanation derived from the approaches presented above or a combination thereof, can not sufficiently account for Bhutan's

transition to democracy. The only things that can be distilled from them are factors that might have had a supporting or conducive effect on the prospects of transition. But as it has been shown, the influencing variables identified by many scholars would rather point in the opposite direction. Bhutan has probably been one of the most unlikely places to develop democracy. And yet it did. But what empowered a single individual to launch all these reforms despite a discouraging structural context and a complete lack of demand for democracy? To my view it is the paradox already indicated above that accounts for the smooth transition to democracy. On the one hand, political power has not been interpreted by the monarch as his ability to do whatever is good for him, but almost exclusively as a means to provide for stability, harmony, and peace for his country and people. The fundamental Buddhist ideas of compassion and responsibility, the quest for enlightenment to advance one's own mind and existence, were paired with an astonishing capacity to rule and govern the real world. The ideas of the interconnectedness of *Dharma* and *Samsara* were not only underlying state principles, but also reflected upon the monarch's attitudes to engage in politics. On the other hand, and this argument might be just as compelling, especially to those who reject the first one as purely esoteric, the power of the monarch to engage in changes that actually did not directly reflect the people's aspirations and for which no demand existed, stemmed from an astonishing surplus of legitimacy. If we assume that legitimacy for a political system is grounded in its subjects' support (Cf. for example Easton, D. 1975), in general or output specific, for the system, one can argue that the general support in Bhutan did not relate to the institutional setup before the transition per se, but rather to the institution of monarchy. With the above mentioned exception, the monarchs had never discredited themselves and reigned with the larger responsibility for society at view. The output specific support for the policy decisions by the King and the Royal Government had been the result of a carefully planned and executed policy of 'change in continuity', that did not oppress the people, provided development without uprooting them, and safeguarded the norms and values which they held dear. This remarkable legitimacy generating balance can be attributed to a political strategy of hybridization that shaped past and present policies and institutions. The fourth King was able to connect traditional Bhutanese values, norms and institutions with concepts and ideas of governance that clearly did not emanate in the country. As his authority was by no means contested he was able to reduce the uncertainty commonly attributed to periods of transition by providing an open and transparent process of reformulating the 'rules of the game'. In the end, one should probably also consider that democracy was probably not seen as an end in itself, but rather as a means for ensuring a continued and safe pursuit of a common or greater good.

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