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The Politics of Bhutan

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Introduction

Nestled high in the eastern Himalayas, Bhutan has long captured global attention for its unique approach to governance and development. The so-called "Land of the Thunder Dragon" is not merely notable for its scenic beauty and centuries-old traditions, but also for its distinctive political evolution, marked by an uncommon harmony between old and new. Once an absolute monarchy, Bhutan now stands as a rare example of a peaceful, top-down transition to a democratic constitutional monarchy, an achievement orchestrated by the very royal house that once held absolute power.

The politics of Bhutan are deeply intertwined with the nation's spiritual and cultural heritage. Rooted in the philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH), Bhutan's governance aspires to foster well-being that transcends material prosperity. This principle, unique on the world stage, guides every facet of the country's policymaking and underlies its enduring focus on balancing tradition with progress. GNH, enshrined in the Constitution, serves as both a metric and a mission, helping to frame debates around economic growth, environmental stewardship, and societal well-being.

This book aims to provide a comprehensive guide to the many dimensions of Bhutanese politics and its political system. Beginning with the historical genesis of political authority in the country, we trace the path from the theocratic dual system to the establishment of the Wangchuck monarchy, and then to today's representative democracy. We explore in detail the governmental structure established by the 2008 Constitution, the roles and responsibilities of each branch, and the sometimes complex relationship between the secular state and the dominant Drukpa Kagyu Buddhist tradition.

Central to this story are the people and parties who have shaped Bhutan's modern political journey. This book examines the evolution of political parties, the mechanics of the electoral system, the rise of elected leadership, and the continued influence of the monarchy. Special attention is given to current political issues—including economic development, migration, corruption, representation of women and minorities, and the intersection of religion and politics—which continue to generate debate and shape policy in the kingdom.

Bhutan does not exist in a vacuum. The country's delicate geopolitical position, wedged between regional giants India and China, has far-reaching implications for its domestic politics and foreign policy. Furthermore, the politics of identity, national unity, and cultural preservation remain sources of both strength and tension, particularly for ethnic and religious minorities whose place within Bhutanese society is

continually being negotiated.

As Bhutan's democracy matures, it faces both remarkable opportunities and persistent challenges. Will the nation succeed in sustaining the balance between safeguarding its unique values and embracing necessary reforms? Can Gross National Happiness serve as a viable alternative to more conventional models of development and governance? In the chapters that follow, we delve into these questions, offering insight into the foundations, workings, and prospects for the politics of Bhutan.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land and People of Bhutan

Bhutan, officially the Kingdom of Bhutan, is a landlocked country tucked away in the eastern Himalayas, a position that has profoundly shaped its history, culture, and, consequently, its politics. Its borders are shared with the Tibet Autonomous Region of China to the north and northwest, and with the Indian states of Sikkim, West Bengal, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh to the west, south, and east. This geographical embrace by two of the world's most populous nations has inevitably played a significant role in Bhutan's external relations and internal dynamics. The country's small size, approximately 38,394 square kilometers, is dwarfed by its neighbors, yet its strategic location imbues it with a geopolitical significance that belies its physical scale.

The terrain of Bhutan is predominantly mountainous, a fact that is immediately apparent to anyone who has seen photographs or visited this breathtaking nation. Ranging dramatically in elevation from subtropical plains in the south to towering, snow-capped peaks in the north, the landscape is a dramatic tapestry of deep valleys, swift rivers, and dense forests. The Himalayas dominate the northern reaches, with several peaks exceeding 7,000 meters, including Gangkhar Puensum, the highest unclimbed mountain in the world at 7,570 meters. These formidable mountains act as a natural barrier, influencing everything from climate patterns to historical settlement and the development of distinct regional cultures.

Bhutan's climate varies significantly with altitude, creating a diverse range of ecological zones. The southern plains experience a humid subtropical climate with hot summers and cool winters. The central valleys, where much of the population resides, enjoy a more temperate climate with warm summers and cool winters. The high northern regions are characterized by an arctic climate with permanent snow and glaciers. This varied climate, coupled with the dramatic topography, contributes to Bhutan's remarkable biodiversity, making it a hotspot for a wide array of plant and animal life.

Rivers are the lifeblood of Bhutan, carving deep valleys and providing vital resources. The country is broadly divided into four major river basins: the Amo Chhu, Wong Chhu, Puna Tsang Chhu, and Manas River Basins. These rivers, fed by glacial melt and monsoon rains, flow south into India, eventually joining the Brahmaputra River. They are not navigable in the mountainous regions, but their power is harnessed for hydroelectricity, a key component of Bhutan's economy and a major export.

The people of Bhutan, known as Drukpas, are as diverse as the landscape they inhabit. The population, estimated to be around 784,000 in 2025, is concentrated primarily in

the fertile valleys of the central and western regions. The rugged terrain has historically kept communities somewhat isolated, contributing to the development of distinct local cultures and languages.

Three main ethnic groups constitute the majority of the population. The Ngalops, believed to have migrated from Tibet, are dominant in the western and central parts of the country and have historically held significant political influence. They are largely adherents of the Drukpa Kagyu school of Mahayana Buddhism. The Sharchops, considered to be the earliest inhabitants of Bhutan, reside predominantly in the eastern regions and are of Indo-Mongoloid origin. They also follow Tibetan Buddhism, with some incorporating elements of the pre-Buddhist Bon religion.

The third major ethnic group is the Lhotshampas, people of Nepali origin who settled in the southern foothills beginning in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. They are primarily Hindu and have historically faced challenges regarding their integration and citizenship, an issue that has had significant political ramifications. While these three groups form the majority, Bhutan is also home to several smaller indigenous and migrant communities, further enriching its cultural mosaic.

Bhutanese culture is deeply intertwined with its dominant religion, Mahayana Buddhism, specifically the Drukpa Kagyu lineage. Monasteries, stupas, and prayer flags are ubiquitous across the landscape, reflecting the centrality of faith in daily life. Traditional arts, architecture, music, and dance are often imbued with religious themes and serve to transmit Buddhist principles. The iconic *dzongs*, imposing fortress-monasteries, are not merely religious sites but have historically served as centers of administration and continue to hold significance in the political structure.

While Buddhism is the state's "spiritual heritage," the constitution also provides for freedom of religion and the King is the "protector of all religions." Hinduism is the second-largest religion, practiced mainly by the Lhotshampa community in the south. Although the government recognizes major Buddhist and Hindu holidays, other religious groups, including Christians and Muslims, constitute a very small percentage of the population and face limitations on public worship and registration.

Bhutan has a rich linguistic diversity, with over two dozen languages and dialects spoken across the country. Most of these belong to the Tibeto-Burman language family, reflecting the country's historical and cultural ties with Tibet. Dzongkha, a Tibeto-Burman language with close ties to Tibetan, is the official and national language, spoken predominantly in the western regions. Tshangla, or Sharchopkha, is another major language spoken by the Sharchops in the east. Nepali is the primary language of the Lhotshampa community. English is also widely used in education and government. This linguistic tapestry, while a testament to Bhutan's diverse heritage, also presents challenges for national unity and communication.

The distribution of the population across Bhutan is heavily influenced by the topography. The fertile valleys in the west and center are the most densely populated areas, providing suitable land for agriculture, which remains a significant livelihood for a large portion of the population. The more challenging terrain of the eastern and northern regions supports a more scattered population. This geographical influence on population distribution has also played a role in the historical development of regional power bases and continues to be a factor in political representation and development initiatives.

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