

BHUTAN'S KING ABDICATES, HANDS POWER TO CROWN PRINCE



KING JIGME SINGYE WANGCHUK

DEC 2006.

King Jigme Singye Wangchuk has abdicated to make way for his son, Crown Prince Jigme Kesar Namgyel Wangchuk, to become Bhutan's first constitutional monarch.

The 51-year-old monarch had planned to abdicate in 2008 when Bhutan is slated to hold its first elections and become a parliamentary democracy. But it is understood the abdication has been brought forward to give 26-year-old Namgyel time to gain more political experience. The decision by this very popular head of state to quit has come as a shock to the 700,000 Bhutanese citizens of the kingdom.

King Wangchuk was the fourth king of the tiny nation. He ascended to the throne in 1972 at 16 years of age, after the death of his father. He became most famous for having decided to make his isolated mountain nation's priority not its GDP, but its GNH -- or "gross national happiness."

Bhutan's monarchy dates back to 1907, when King Wangchuk's great grandfather was formally anointed the first king, with British support.

The isolated Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan is land-locked between India and Tibet (China), and has remained untouched by most modern influences. In recent years, Jigme Wangchuk slowly pulled the state into the modern world and opted to relinquish much of the monarchy's power.

Television arrived in Bhutan in 1999 and the Internet in 2000. But Bhutanese policies are directed at preserving the culture and environment of the nation. Only 6,000 foreign visitors are allowed in each year.

JIGME KHESAR NAMGYEL WANGCHUCK BECOMES THE 5th DRUK GYALPO (Bhutan King)

Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk, 26, is Jigme Singye Wangchuk's eldest son, who studied in the US before graduating in politics from Magdalen College as Oxford.



KING NAMGYEL WANGCHUK

King Jigme Wangchuk, 51, said, "I am confident that a very bright future lies ahead for Bhutan with the leadership of a new king and a democratic system of government that is best suited for our country as enshrined under the Constitution. I have every confidence that there will be unprecedented progress and prosperity for our nation in the reign of our fifth King."

The outgoing king expressed his confidence that Namgyel, as the fifth Druk Gyalpo was fully capable of carrying out his responsibilities. Judging by his performance as Crown Prince, and his thinking, and his principles, the king said he had no doubt that the fifth Druk Gyalpo would serve his nation with selfless dedication. His Majesty said that if the Crown Prince was not worthy, he would not have handed over his responsibilities just because he was his own son.

While overseas, Prince Namgyel became known as “Prince Charming” because of his pleasant manner and good looks.

BHUTAN – THE LAND OF THE DRAGON

The Himalayan state of Bhutan is a mountainous country of breathtaking beauty, which calls itself the "Land of the Thunder Dragon." The Bhutanese name of the nation, in fact, is DRUK – “dragon,” and the dragon is featured on the national flag. The yellow of the upper part of the flag expresses the politics and the right of the king. The orange expresses the right of Buddhism.

The kingdom has a form of government which practices a separation of politics and religion; the king takes care of politics, and the head lama conducts the religious side.



Bhutan is becoming increasingly known for its pure practice of Mahayana Buddhism in the Tantric form, its untouched culture, its pristine ecology and wildlife, and the unparalleled scenic beauty of its majestic peaks and lush valleys.

It is a matter of pride to the Bhutanese that their small kingdom was never colonised. Its ancient history, which is a mixture of the oral tradition and classical literature, tells of a largely self-sufficient population which had limited contact with the outside world until the turn of the century.

Bhutan has been described as a natural paradise. While much of the world mourns the loss of its ecology, this small Kingdom is emerging as an example to the international community; it has more than 72 percent of its land still under forest and has a great variety of rare plant and wildlife species.

The terrain in Bhutan ranges from the sub-tropical foothills in the south, through the temperate zones, to dizzying heights of over 7,300 meters (24,000 feet).

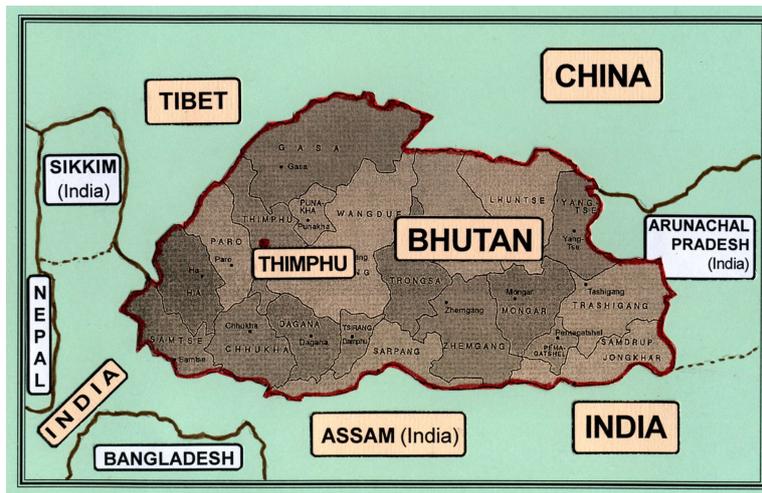
The population of Bhutan is, in many ways, one large family. More than 90 percent of the people live on subsistence farming, scattered in sparsely populated villages across the rugged terrain. The people farm narrow terraces cut into the steep hill slopes.

Rice is the staple diet in the lower regions, while wheat, buckwheat, and maize is in the other valleys. In the past, Bhutanese communities settled in the valleys with limited communication. It is for this reason that the sense of individuality and independence emerges as a strong characteristic of the people. It is for the same reason that, despite the small population, it has developed a number of languages and dialects.

Bhutanese national dress is compulsory for men and women, and smoking is banned.

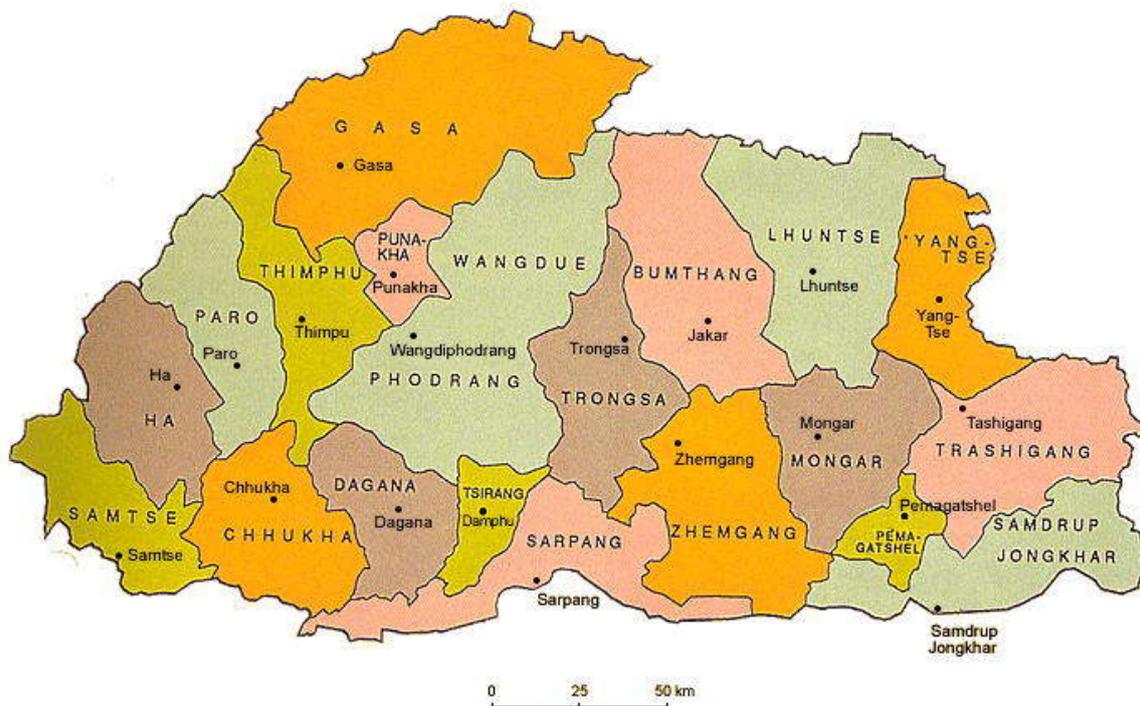
Bhutan is a land of dzongs (fortresses) and monasteries. The national sport is archery. Each village has its own archery range, and contests take place the whole year round.

The Bhutanese are, by nature, physically strong and fiercely independent with an open and ready sense of humour. Hospitality is an in-built social value in Bhutan.



BHUTAN AND ITS NEIGHBOURS
(see details of Bhutan's provinces below)

- Total Area:** 47,000 sq. km
- Population:** 700,000 +
- Ethnicity:** Bhote 50%, ethnic Nepalese 35%, indigenous or migrant tribes 15%
- Languages:** Dzongkha (official), various Druk, Tibetan and Nepalese dialects
- Religions:** Lamaistic Buddhist 75%; Indian/Nepalese Hinduism 25%. Christians 0.3%
- Capital:** THIMPHU



DISTRICTS OF BHUTAN

BHUTAN'S NEW CONSTITUTION

The announcement of the king's abdication in favour of the Crown Prince comes at a time when the nation is preparing to change from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional one.

Sources in Thimphu are reported as saying the king brought the date of transfer forward because he believed it better to democratize sooner rather than risk suffering the same fate as Nepal's King

Gyanendra who was stripped of all his remaining vestiges of power and removed (at last temporarily) as head of state in Nepal, in December (06). (There is no suggestion, however, that the Bhutan king was under similar pressure.)

A new constitution is expected to be formally adopted very soon, which will set up a two-party democracy after nearly a century of absolute monarchy. The draft of this first written constitution was introduced in March 2005.

The constitution provides for two houses of parliament – a 75-member national assembly and a 25-member national council – with the king as the head of state.

The Constitution emanated from the King whose vision would take the country into the distant future, ensuring the well being of the people and the sovereignty of the nation. It also mandated for the people of Bhutan more fundamental rights than most other Constitutions.

King Jigme Wangchuk had himself worked on the Constitution for two years. He had studied more than 100 different Constitutions, not to copy their contents, but to draw from them and make the contents of the Bhutanese Constitution more meaningful.

The Chief Justice of Bhutan said that His Majesty the King was personally presenting the Constitution to the people of Bhutan. This had never before happened in human history.

There has been a lot of discussion in Bhutan on the provisions in the constitution regarding religion. The main religion of Bhutan is Lamaistic (Mahayana/Tibetan) Buddhism, but some advocates wanted the spiritual heritage of Bhutan to be specified as Drukpa Kagyu and Nyingma schools instead of generalising it as Buddhism. Others suggested that religion and politics should not be separated since Bhutan had prospered throughout history because of the harmony between religion and politics. One demand was for specific provisions for the rabdeys and goendeys, and another voice maintained that the Druk Gyalpo (Bhutan King) should be described as the protector of Buddhism and not of all religions.

The Chief Justice explained that the drafting committee had discussed these issues thoroughly and had come to the agreement that, since the Constitution was a document that looked 100 years ahead, it would not be advisable to mention different sects because there are other religious sects in Bhutan. The committee had also seen wisdom in the democratic philosophy of separating the Religion from the State because it would enable both religion and politics to flourish without interference from each other. He said that His Majesty the King, as head of state, was mandated to be the protector of all religions.

The emphasis on Buddhist culture has in the past led to serious rioting among the Nepali Hindu community in the south of Bhutan.

For a long time Christians have faced intimidation and imprisonment. Early 2006, two Bhutanese evangelists were imprisoned for several months after showing the Jesus film in a home.

Let us pray that the new monarch will be a wise ruler, and that the constitution will indeed bring freedom, as it promises, to all the people of this beautiful land.

