

De-Suung: The Orange Army

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ABSTRACT

What was the need of the Orange Army with strength more than that of the Royal Bhutan Army or the Royal Bhutan Police? The Orange Army called *De-Suung* (Organisation) and *Desuup* (members) established in 2010 on the auspicious of the King's thirtieth birthday is now the largest force in the country with more than 18,000 permanent members from all walks of life and all corners of the country. Formed on the principle of volunteerism, the Orange Army is dedicated to crowd control, rescue, and operation during emergencies, and takes up the role of alert citizens. Now, it is the fastest-growing organisation in the country. Its formation and functioning are outside the expectation of the constitution. However, the King who is the guardian of the constitution and the supreme commander in chief of armed forces and militia is also the supreme commander of this extra-constitutional Orange Army. While the King needs a recommendation from the Prime Minister to command the army and police, the government has no control over the Orange Army, formed and run by the King who commands it directly. The Orange Army is now running a parallel government and is growing incredibly popular among the citizens most of whom are not happy with the democratic parliamentary system in the country and victims of calamities. There is no mechanism to check the cankerous Orange Army if it walks the way of SAVAK, Gestapo, Ku Klux Klan, or the Yakuza except the formation of another extra-constitutional institution to counter it.

Keywords: Calamities, militia, secret agency, security, totalitarian, volunteerism,

Introduction

Orange uniformed extra-constitutional army personnel are everywhere in Bhutan (Rinzin, 2020). Called by the name *De-Suung* (De-Suung,

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2020) (heavenly protection), His Majesty King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck of Bhutan keeps them around him and are the first faces seen in rescue teams during or after calamities. The paramilitary personnel reaches first at the sites of earthquake, flash flood, landslide, glacial outburst, road blockade, and inferno- that are common in the country- with helping hands and balm. The orange uniformed personnel is in the front-line in controlling crowds. Now, a decade-old Orange Army is the largest force liked by both the people and victims of calamities and has been functioning without a question or a word of criticism.

Bhutan does have a long history of organised secured forces. Until 1950, the security of Bhutan and its rulers was the responsibility of the people and loosely organised soldiers and monks. Several families would allow one of their male children to a monastery to take up the study of religion and rituals and another male child to be a ruler's soldier. In 1951, a group of soldiers was trained to suppress the growing discontentment among the people. Their first major accomplishment was the neutralisation of the movement by the Bhutan State Congress. The group of soldiers continued in several forms taking up specialised roles. Royal Bhutan Army (RBA) was propagated from the group in 1962 on the backdrop of the Sino-Indian War. After the assassination of Prime Minister Jigme Palden Dorji and the public execution of the accused Chhabda, Royal Bhutan Police (RBP) was institutionalised on September 1, 1965. It was employed to control crowds and suppress sporadic protests by the people in different parts of the country.

After the death of the third King in 1972, several forces were active in preventing the then crown prince Jigme Singye Wangchuck from becoming the king (Weinraub, B. 1974). A troop cloned from the RBA was empowered with special training to provide security to the King and the members of the royal family. They formed Royal Bodyguards (RBG). In 1989 and 1990, youths and students were provided militia training by the RBA. They were employed to crush the movement in southern Bhutan in 1990-1993 and the monks uprising in eastern Bhutan in 1997 (Child Soldiers International, 2001).

Between 2001 and 2003, selected personnel from RBA, RBP, and RBG and militia were provided commando training. They were led to the infamous ‘operation all clear’ when the Indian fugitives who were provided political sanctuary and patronage at the beginning (Mahanta, 2013) and taking refuge in the forest in Bhutan and fighting for independence of Assam and a part of Bengal against Indian establishment were crushed (Lamsang, 2015).

After the systemic political reforms that took place between 2005 and 2008, the RBP and RBA were placed under the Ministry of Home and Culture Affairs. This clearly means that these two wings of the armed forces are placed under the government. The RBG that is responsible for the security of the King and royalties have limited numbers and strict protocols. The King cannot command any of those forces at his whims.

It was at this juncture that the then-new king chalked out plans of raising volunteers under his sole command who would respond to his calls and remain loyal to him throughout their lives. During his third year in his office as a King, he began raising volunteers. The institution is called *De-Suung* and its members are called *Desuups*. In the Dzongkha language, *De* means heavenly and *Sung* means protection or governance (Dzongkha Development Commission, 2002).

As per the constitution of Bhutan, the king shall be the Supreme Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces and the Militia; The RBG shall be responsible for the security of the king while the RBA shall serve as a professional standing army and both forces shall form the core of Bhutan’s defence against security threats. The RBP shall, as a trained uniform force under the Ministry of Home Affairs, be primarily responsible for maintaining law and order and prevention of crime, and shall also be considered an important part of the nation’s security force; and the parliament may, by law, require compulsory militia service for adult citizens to strengthen the defence of the country (Constitution of Bhutan, 2008).

There is no provision in the constitution for such a paramilitary force and there are no measures to check and balance them. The constitution keeps the king and his actions unquestionable. As per article 2, clause 15

the king shall not be answerable in a court of law for his actions and his person shall be sacrosanct (Constitution of Bhutan, 2008). Taking undue advantage of the magnanimity of the provision in the constitution, the king has started to take such giant steps. Within a decade, the extra-constitutional paramilitary institution has turned into the largest force that has volunteerism on the face and role of an intelligence agency in action.

The *Desuups* mold difficult opponents into loyal citizens through lucrative talks. The process of entry into *De-Suung* begins from a call with a prospect of volunteerism during calamities and there is no exit. Once an individual enters the so-called volunteer group, takes training and oath of allegiance, there is no provision of resignation, retirement, or exit from the service throughout one's life. It is a lifelong promise to serve the King and to be ready to attend his call.

The office of *De-Suung* located at Lungtenphug Army Training Complex in Thimphu periodically calls for new candidates. The applicant must be at least class ten passed and aged 20 years or above and are admitted on a first come first serve basis. They have to submit 'No Objection Certificates' from their office if employed, and from police for all.

The members of the *Desuup* force are extracted from different institutions, universities, constitutional bodies including Election Commission and Anti-Corruption Commission, courts, RBA, RBP, business organisations, schools, medical institutions, farmers, tour guides, unemployed youth, and in-service and retired government employees. Even members of parliaments have taken the training to appease the king and to seek his favor in future courses.

The *Desuups* are publicly soft-speaking, friendly and supportive individuals in uniform, who belong to an extra-constitutional (hence illegal) secret force run by the king himself. There are various reasons behind its formation. All reasons expressed to date are altruistic in traits, but the fear is on the very intention of the formation of such an extra-constitutional paramilitary force and its cankerous growth.

According to the Constitution of Bhutan, the King is the Supreme Commander in Chief of the armed forces. The king must wait for a recommendation from the prime minister, who in turn must have the approval of the cabinet, to command the RBA or RBP. There is a limit of 2,000 personnel in RBG. Moreover, the king is not confident that the army, police, and bodyguards will walk an inch outside their protocols. The king chose the extra-constitutional path to implement his vision, ideas, and whims. The highest vision could be the autocratic monarchy with a browbeaten government.

Methods

Primary information was obtained from people in Bhutan who have taken the service and other people who have studied the situation closely. The information was verified based on the information given on the website of the Orange Army (<https://desuung.org.bt/>) and social media sites of the *Desuups*. The names of the informants are kept confidential.

Findings

Monarchy Under Constitution

In 2005, the former King Jigme Singye Wangchuck made several populist changes to win the confidence of the people for the easy accession of his son to his throne. The bans on the use of the word 'democracy' and the formation of political parties in the country were lifted. A constitution was drafted and promulgated, elections were held to find people's representatives to form government and the prime minister was made the head of the government while the king remained the head of the state and the guardian of the constitution. The former King abdicated in favor of his son- the present King Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck. The reasons behind those several populist reforms were to take rest from the series of bloody endeavors taken to conserve the power in the family and hand over the power to the son at the apogee of his reign when the situations were under his control. The bloody exercises included the crushing of voices for democratic changes, murder, and mass expulsion of political opponents in 1990 and 1997, and the 2003 undiplomatic withdrawal from engagement in the repatriation of the evicted population. Besides, the 2003 bloody war against the Indian insurgents hiding in Bhutan added guilt to the king.

The new king was coronated as a ceremonial head with no power to exercise and no work to win people's praises and appreciation. The media began to grow critical by questioning the government's wrongdoings and people often came to the street. The powerless king had to wait for the prime minister's approval to take any step. The constitution was a cage on the new king's freedom.

Establishment of Royal Media Foundation

Coinciding with his thirtieth birthday on February 21, 2010, the king established a foundation and brought all public and private media establishments in Bhutan under Royal 'Bhutan Media Foundation.' The King granted Nu 15,000,000 to bring all the media houses under the royal foundation (Press release, 2010/3). The media houses became eligible for incentives such as subsidies, advertisements, fellowships, grants, and training. In return, they had to submit their loyalty to the king. Thereafter, all the media critical to the system were silenced for good. All the news, views, interviews, and opinions are censored through mechanisms established under the media foundation before they go public.

De-Suung: The King's Force

On the same day he grabbed all the media in the country into his foundation, the king also established *De-Suung* the Orange Army that started functioning a year later. The objective is to inculcate pure values such as accountability and responsibility, commitment, ethics, integrity, respect, self-discipline, and service first in the *Desuups* and extend to all the citizens (De-suung, 2020). Any youth meeting criteria can apply to become *Desuup* using an online registration system. The candidate must present five documents – (1) copy of citizenship identity document, (2) copy of academic certificate of the highest degree achieved, (3) No objection certificate from concerned agencies for the employed, (4) medical certificate of fitness, and (5) security clearance from RBP.

The selected volunteer is provided training and administered the oath and becomes a *Desuup*- a member of *De-Suung*. The *Desuup* gets an orange uniform and several recognitions and per diem of Nu 1000 during the training and operation days. However, there is no mention of

punishment if one tries to break the oath. They must remain alert to respond to any royal command; they must report any irregularities and anti-regime comments in their command areas and institutions to their *Desuup* supervisors. They celebrate His Majesty's birthday, National Day, and *De-Suung* Raising Day as well as provide muscle power to control crowds during such mega-events.

They must appear polite and humble in the public, for which they must treat their supervising officers with courtesy and respect; at all times be humble, civil, and orderly; and control their tempers and exercise the utmost patience and discretion.

Organisational Structure

The present King is the supreme commander of the Orange Army. It is independent of the government and His Majesty's Secretariat handles its everyday affairs. Directly below the office of the His Majesty's Secretariat in Tashichho Dzong is the *De-Suung's* director. The Directorate of *De-Suung* is in Lungtenphug. There is one district coordinator in each district, four zonal coordinators, and focal persons in blocks and villages and government and private institutes who report to the directorate. All the positions are held by Drukpas. The open role of the *Desuup* is to remain alert to attend any call during emergencies. However, *Desuups* are expected to report the irregularities ongoing in their command areas or offices.

What was the need for the Supreme Commander in Chief of the RBA, RBP, and RBG to start an extra-constitutional force? Will its future action continue to be limited to alms and balm during disasters or will it take the path of Gestapo and Schafft Schutzzzone of Germany, Sevak of Iran, Ku Klux Klan of the USA, Uyoku Dantai and Yakuza of Japan?

***De-suung* honour code and core values**

I as *De-suup* will keep service to my nation before my own safety and comfort.

I as *De-suup* will remain honest in thoughts and upright in actions.

I as *De-suup* will protect the national heritage even at the cost of my own life.

I as *De-suup* will never vacillate from integrity to my motherland and loyalty to my supreme commander.

I as *De-suup* will always volunteer for service to TSA-WA-SUM at any point of time.

I as *De-suup* will never let down my Supreme Commander and my fellow *De-suups*.

I as *De-suup* vow in the name of deity of our motherland that I will abide this honor code always and every time.

Source: <https://desuung.org.bt/>

Training

Training for *Desuups* takes place in Tencholing Military Training Centre Wangduephodrang, Damthang (Paro), Gaylegphug² (Sarbang³), Chuwabari⁴ (Sarbang), Tashigatshel (Chukha), Thimphu, Paro, Sibsoo⁵ (Samchi⁶), Tendu⁷ (Samchi), and other military centers. The paramilitary *Desuup* is now the largest force in the country with more than 18,000 members. The strength of RBA including the RBG is 12,700, and RBP is 14,000.

² Gaylegphug was renamed Gelephu in late 1990s

³ Sarbang was renamed Sarpang in late 1990s

⁴ Chuwabari was renamed Jigmeling in late 1990s

⁵ Sibsoo is renamed as Tachicholing in late 1990s

⁶ Samchi was renamed Samtse in late 1990s

⁷ Tendu was renamed Tendruk in late 1990s

Between 2011 and 2020 there were series of training in 43 batches. The training for the 43rd batch took place between November 16 and December 12, 2020. The training was held simultaneously in six training centers of MTC (Tencholing), SRPF (Chukha), Wing IX (Gayglephug), Wing V (Sibsoo), Wing I (Tendu⁸), and RBPTI (Jigmeling) (Staff Reporter, 2020). The batch had 668 male and 832 female participants. They were mostly unemployed youth with at least Class X degrees. After the trainings, the *Desuups* were expected to volunteer for short-term field deployment in different districts.

Until the 37th batch, there were on average 12 trainees in each batch. However, the number has rapidly escalated in 2020. In six batches that were held in 2020, more than 14,000 *Desuups* graduated. The rush of increasing the extra-constitutional force shows that big events are on the card.

The volunteers get to experience real-life activities outside their regular four walls. There are competitive adventures for them to showcase their strength, skills, and strategy to survive during calamities. Common adventurous activities include mapping, rappelling, route marching, and zip-lining (Denker, 2020).

There are two types of training namely the *De-Suung* Integrated Training Programme and the *De-Suung* Accelerated Programme that are instituted to be a value-based personal development programme with the main objective to encourage all citizens to be active in the greater role of nation-building. The training programmes are designed to inculcate appreciation, harmony, and cooperation as a group and as active members of society. *De-Suung* Accelerated Programme focuses on public health and security, to prepare the *Desuups* to support health workers such as in combating COVID- 19, if necessary.

Works of *Desuup*

It has been said that the *De-Suung* was meant to respond to disasters. However, in 2013, Prime Minister Jigme Y. Thinley informed the

⁸ Tendu was renamed Tendruk in late 1990s

parliament that the king in exercise of his profound wisdom initiated a special *De-Suung* Training Programme for strengthening the internal law and order (National Assembly of Bhutan, 2013). It was an acknowledgment that the government was not capable of maintaining law and order. By then, 700 personnel had received training to respond and serve during disasters in the country (National Assembly of Bhutan, 2013). When a seventeenth Century Wangdue Phodrang Dzong caught fire, the king and his *Desuups* were in the frontline fighting the inferno. Prime Minister and other officers were nowhere near the scene. They were in other places busy preaching gross national happiness anthems. The *Desuups* got the first highlight there. The Covid-19 pandemic, dengue epidemic, and cordyceps collection time availed the *Desuups* with opportunities to reach every house and individual, possibly for gathering information and maintaining inventories of places, people and their properties. Selected tour operators and tour guides are trained as *Desuups* (Gyelmo, 2016) to keep track of the tourists and report to the *De-Suung*.

Twenty *Desuups* were deputed in medical team during the rescue operation of the 2015 earthquake in Nepal (Pem, 2016). In November 2018, at least 120 *Desuups* were deputed to control crowds for two weeks long prayers by Je Khenpo in Rajgir and Bodhgaya, India (Rinzin, 2020).

In January 2016, 100 *Desuups* took part in Clean Bhutan Campaign when they collected 10 tonnes of waste including about two sacks of condoms, plastic bags, pet bottles, sanitary pads, toilet papers, and underwear (Wangdi, 2016).

In June 2020, *Desuups* were involved in recording medical and biometrics of people involved in collection of cordyceps from the wild (Lhamo, Cordyceps collectors being screened for safety, 2020). In July 2020, *Desuups* helped in cleaning the area and planting trees around the Luetshokha Lake in Samtengang, Wangdue district (Lhamo, Preservation of Luetshokha tsho completes , 2020).

On September 15, 2020, two *Desuup* ladies on duty were overrun by a Hilux driven by a drunk driver. They were airlifted and taken to Delhi for treatment.

The *Desuups* are entitled to free life insurances. If a *Desuup* dies during the Covid-19 duty, his or her nominee will receive the insurance (Subba, Free life insurance for Covid-19 frontline workers, 2020).

***De-Suung* as a Secret Intelligence Agency**

In July 2020, Four hundred *Desuups* joined the security forces patrolling the southern borders to identify the people suspected as vectors of coronavirus crossing the border. People were confined in quarantine as per the Covid 19 management guidelines (Kuensel, 2020).

In August 2020, three villagers who had crossed Bhutan-India border to sell their cattle in India were arrested and put in quarantine. They were punished, made to pay for the quarantine service, Covid-19 tests, and had to pay 10 days of labor services (Lhaden, 2020) for breaching the protocol of crossing the border.

The *Desuups* to regulate the movement of people distributed movement passes to the residents in Samdrup Jongkhar. The *Desuups* categorized the residents into zones (Wangchuk K. , 2020) for easy monitoring of their movements.

In November 2020, *Desuups* were with police and custom officers in seizing tobacco consignments being smuggled across the borders and arresting at least 47 smugglers (Rai, 2020).

In November and December 2020, the *Desuups* and police intelligence rounded up business owners in Thimphu for continuing their work after 9 pm. They also went from shop-to-shop checking licenses (Yangyel, 2020).

The king conferred his *De-Suung* with ‘Heart Son of Bhutan Medal’ in recognition of its service during the Covid-19 pandemic (Kuensel, 2020a).

Funding for the Organisation

There is no information on the source of funding for *De-Suung*. One of the sources is His Majesty’s Secretariat in Tashicho Dzong. Besides, the

government also diverts the excess budgets that are not spent by government bodies by the end of each fiscal year. There is a small collection of *De-Suung* shops that sell uniforms and clothing. Officers good to *De-Suung* adjust and divert their unspent budget of their officers to *De-Suung*. In one such case, Anti-Corruption Commission charged Lieutenant Colonel Rinzin Yeshey with embezzling more than Nu 889,000, and a military court sentenced Yeshey to four years and six months in prison, but the High Court's bench III acquitted him for lack of corroborating evidence. He had adjusted the fund to conduct the fifth and 10th batch of *De-Suung* programmes (Pandem & Dema, 2019). The Bhutan Media Foundation, a partner organisation of *De-Suung*, receives support from the Swiss Embassy in New Delhi through Helvates (Bhutan Media Foundation and Journalist Association of Bhutan, 2020) and the US-based Asia Foundation (Asia Foundation, 2020). They are involved in the study of users' involvement in social media. On December 14, 2020, Tashi Dorji the Chairperson of National Council informed the parliament that at least 9000 *Desuups* were provided monthly payments provided to them during pandemic (Subba, His Majesty graces closing ceremony of Parliament, 2020).

De-suung and Corruption

While the volunteers and the king are in the field attending the calls of catastrophes and training, there are officers in between who are busy embezzling the funds for gifts and alcohol.

On October 25, 2018, High Court's bench two convicted two army officers Major Tshering Tobgay and Major Sonam Tshering, and a non-commissioned officer (NCO) Tanka on the charge of embezzling *De-Suung* Training Fund (Tshering, 2018).

On November 15, 2019, the Supreme Court of Bhutan sentenced nine RBA Officers and a non-commissioned officer (NCO) for embezzlement of the *De-Suung* training funds. The accused were sentenced to prison terms ranging from one to three years. Major Ugyen Nidup, Lieutenant Colonel Rinzin Yeshey, Lieutenant Ugyen Dorji, Major Sonam Lhagyel, Lieutenant Colonel Karma Tharchen, Lieutenant Colonel Ugyen Norbu, Major Sigay Tshewang, Major Lingi Jamtsho, and NCO Sonam Dorji were dragged to the supreme court. They were charged for adjustment

of funds to provide funds to support *De-Suung* programmes (Wangchuk R. , 2019).

Major Kinga Norbu submitted to the High Court that besides serving alcohol to the *Desuups* on occasions, the administrative officers had to serve the drinks to the director every night which was the practice from the first batch of *Desuups* (Dema, 2018).

Conclusion

A tiny kingdom between two giant republics of China and India has a small population of less than a million. It has small army and police forces. However, the king has established the largest force that works parallel to the government. It is too early to predict the future of the King's Orange Army. However, the working modality, content of the oath, and inclusion of its members from different sectors and areas can only be feared in a long run. History has shown that SAVAK, Gestapo, Ku Klux Klan, Yakuza, and several such secret organisations were adored and accepted by the people at the beginning for their altruist-like populist works. However, such organisation always ended up doing more harm than good to the social and political system. It is high time for the elite groups to study the cancerous phenomenon of raising an alternative force outside the content of the constitution and the system. But the strength of the extra-constitutional Orange Army is already massive and omnipresent in the country that it is equally dangerous to discuss and question.

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