

Bhutanese Political Prisoners, State Denial, and Multilateral Engagement

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Abstract

Bhutan is internationally recognised for its political stability and Gross National Happiness philosophy but its long-term detention of the mostly Nepali-speaking Bhutanese activists raises serious human rights concerns. This article examines Bhutanese political detention based on latest UN, EU and INGO reports, media coverage, and civil society advocacy. It explores state's policy of denial, the nature of international engagement (including the Universal Periodic Review), and diaspora-led campaigns such as by GCRPPB. The article provides comprehensive insight through case studies, and UN legal opinions. The persistent state denial impedes accountability and reform. Individual case studies highlight legal and human impacts, while regional comparisons and UN opinions place Bhutan's situation in a broader context.

Keywords: political prisoners, National Security, human rights, civil society, amnesty

Introduction

Despite international praise for Bhutan's stable transition from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy, significant human rights issues persist, particularly regarding political detention. Since the 1990s, Non-Governmental Organisations and international organisations have documented arrests and prolonged imprisonment of Nepali-speaking Bhutanese activists (AI, 2023; HRW, 2023; Karki, 2021). While these individuals are widely recognised internationally as political prisoners, Bhutanese authorities continue to assert that all convictions are legally justified, maintaining that those detainees are criminals rather than individuals imprisoned for their political beliefs.

International scrutiny of these cases has increased in recent years, especially through United Nations human rights mechanisms. During Bhutan's fourth Universal Periodic Review, multiple submissions raised concerns about arbitrary detention, restrictions on freedom of expression, and the absence of fair trial guarantees in cases involving political dissent (Human Rights Watch, 2024; United

Nations Human Rights Council, 2024). In addition, statements by UN Special Rapporteurs have called for the immediate release of political prisoners, emphasising that the continued use of national security legislation to suppress peaceful political activity is inconsistent with Bhutan's international human rights obligations (OHCHR, 2025). These findings expose a growing gap between Bhutan's international reputation as a rights-respecting state and the realities faced by political detainees, reinforcing the need for sustained international engagement and accountability.

Historical and Legal Context

The roots and legal justifications for political detention in Bhutan can be traced to unrest during the late 1980s and 1990s, particularly in southern region. Protests and demands for political liberalisation were met with arrests, expulsions, and arbitrary enforcement of the National Security Act of 1992, which was enacted post demonstrations and strategically designed to suit the narratives set against these voices for the change. This Act criminalised activities perceived as threats to the Tsa-Wa-Sum (HRW, 2024; Karki, 2021). Its vague provisions enabled the prosecution of peaceful political activities and limited legal safeguards, such as access to counsel and protection against coercion (OHCHR, 2025).

These legal practices have continued to influence how political dissent is addressed in Bhutan even after the transition to constitutional governance. While the 2008 Constitution formally enshrines fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and due process, international observers have repeatedly pointed to a clear gap between these guarantees and their practical application in cases involving political detainees (HRW, 2024; UNHRC, 2024). In the national security cases, the judiciary has tended to defer to executive authority, and court proceedings are often conducted with limited transparency. Consequently, individuals charged under the National Security Act frequently face prolonged detention and lengthy sentences, with few effective avenues for appeal, raising ongoing concerns about the compatibility of Bhutan's legal practices with its international human rights obligations (OHCHR, 2025).

These government actions resulted in the expulsion of more than 100,000 Bhutanese citizens. Following decade long asylum in Nepal, they were resettled in third-countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia beginning in 2007–2008 (Neikirk & Nickson, 2024).

The Act facilitated the arbitrary detention of perceived dissenters by allowing laws to equate political opposition with national security threats. This conflation has suppressed dissenters for extended period, often without robust legal recourse. Independent judicial review has been rare, and appeals processes are obstructed by procedural barriers, resulting in limited oversight over political detention cases.

Scale and Conditions of Political Detention

These detainees were arrested and imprisoned solely because of their political beliefs. They were accused of possessing political documents or participating in political activities that advocated for reforms in Bhutan's system of governance. At the same time, individuals seeking to win favour from the palace were free to proclaim that political reforms were a benevolent gift from the monarch. Yet the continued imprisonment of these and many other individuals stands as a powerful reminder that the push for democratic change in Bhutan did not originate from the throne—it emerged from the people themselves. Their sacrifices form a living testament to the grassroots demand for political transformation.

Throughout world history, calls for political reform under authoritarian or tightly controlled regimes have almost always been branded as criminal acts. Bhutan, unfortunately, has not been an exception to this pattern. Like many older political systems seeking to preserve their authority, Bhutan crafted laws that effectively criminalised dissent and punished those who dared to imagine a more democratic future. As a result, individuals who should be celebrated as pioneers of democratic progress were instead condemned as offenders.

For Bhutan's democracy to mature, endure, and gain genuine legitimacy, it must confront this uncomfortable truth. A political system cannot claim to be fully democratic while continuing to ignore, marginalise, or criminalise the very people who fought for its creation. Recognising these democracy advocates—acknowledging their struggles, restoring their dignity, and correcting the historical narrative—is not merely an act of justice. It is a necessary step toward building a democracy that is honest about its origins and accountable to its citizens.

The scale and conditions of political detention in Bhutan remain difficult to quantify due to the scarcity of reliable information. Amnesty International (AI) (2023) estimates at least 37 long-term political prisoners still languishing in the jails, with some detained for over three decades. Add – how many were there back in 1990s? Human Rights Watch reports document severe conditions - inadequate medical care, poor nutrition, isolation, restricted family contact, and allegations of

torture during interrogation (HRW, 2023; Bhutan Watch, 2025). Based on personal interview with the recently released political prisoners, the reduction in basic needs – food, clothes and medical supplies - for the political prisoners in recent years made it hard for them to survive. A prisoner has died of struggling with these difficulties while this article was being prepared. United Nations classifies these practices as inconsistent with fair trial standards and protections against arbitrary detention (UNHRC, 2024; OHCHR, 2025).

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reported that, in addition to these high-profile cases, at least thirty other individuals remain imprisoned under similar conditions, often facing inadequate food, medical care, and restrictions on communication. Independent monitoring of detention facilities has been limited, raising further concerns about systemic human rights violations (nepalese.com, 2025).

These detainees are confined in isolated cells within the country's most notorious prison, deliberately separated from the general inmate population. They are prohibited from interacting with other prisoners, placed under heightened surveillance, and subjected to constant monitoring. Every aspect of their daily routine, from movement to communication, is carefully scrutinised. Their families and relatives are denied the right to visit them, cutting off the most basic form of human connection and support.

Such extraordinary layers of restriction and security reveal more than just a desire to maintain order. They expose a deep-seated fear within the state - a fear that these individuals, if allowed to interact freely, might influence others politically or inspire broader calls for reform. Their treatment reflects an unspoken acknowledgment that these detainees are not ordinary offenders but individuals whose ideas challenge the established order.

In this sense, Bhutan's actions betray an internal recognition that these individuals are, in fact, political prisoners—people detained not for criminal wrongdoing but for their beliefs and aspirations for political change. Yet the state hesitates to openly admit this reality, fearing the implications it would carry both domestically and internationally.

For years, international observers and rights organisations have raised concerns about individuals detained for expressing political opinions or participating in civic

activities, often under laws criticised for failing to meet basic standards of due process (AI, 2025).

State Denial and International Engagement

Bhutan's official denial to accept these detainees as political prisoners influences its domestic policy and guides its international engagement. The government claims that all convictions are lawful, leading to limited case reviews and reduced cooperation with UN mechanisms (OHCHR, 2025). In the Fourth Universal Periodic Review in 2024, Bhutan accepted recommendations to improve judicial efficiency but declined to review politically sensitive convictions (UNHRC, 2024). Academic studies argue this stance undermines governance legitimacy and weakens compliance with international legal standards.

International engagement by the European Union, Human Right Watch, UN Special Procedures and civil society is important to ongoing efforts for governmental accountability in Bhutan in human rights cases in Bhutan. The European Union has engaged with Bhutan on governance and human rights, pressing for transparency and adherence to international legal obligations. Civil society reports argue that such engagement is crucial to increasing accountability, though progress remains limited.

In its 2024 opinion the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) highlights requirement for continued international scrutiny of Bhutan's political detention practices. In late 2024, the WGAD issued Opinion No. 60/2024 concerning the detention of three Nepali-speaking Bhutanese individuals Birkha Bahadur Chhetri, Kumar Gautam, and Sunman Gurung who have been held since 2008. WGAD said the detention was arbitrary and unlawful (WGAD, 2024).

The WGAD said the detention of these individuals was arbitrary and unlawful on multiple grounds. Their arrest and initial detention occurred without warrants, and they were held incommunicado for prolonged periods before being formally charged, denying them access to legal safeguards. The materials that led to their arrest—political pamphlets—constituted peaceful expression and therefore could not justify their detention under international law (HRW, 2025).

The WGAD also highlighted serious violations of fair trial rights. The proceedings were conducted in Dzongkha, a language the detainees did not understand, and interpretation was provided by government-appointed personnel lacking

independence. The WGAD said their detention was discriminatory, linked to both their political opinions and their ethnic identity, thus breaching protections against political and ethnic discrimination (Bhutan News Network, 2025).

The WGAD made a series of recommendations to the Royal Government of Bhutan following its visit to Bhutan in 2019 and its findings from its consultation with stakeholders in last two years. It called for the immediate release of all detainees, the provision of remedies and reparations, including compensation for those subjected to arbitrary detention, and reform of laws and legislation, particularly the National Security Act, which has frequently been used to suppress peaceful political dissent. The WGAD also emphasised the need for greater transparency and cooperation with international monitoring mechanisms, including independent oversight of detention facilities, as well as the elimination of discriminatory practices in both detention and judicial proceedings (UNHRC, 2025). These recommendations highlight deeper, systemic human rights challenges in Bhutan, particularly regarding freedom of expression, non-discrimination, and fair trial rights, and are grounded in widely recognised international legal standards such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The WGAD is an independent expert body under the Human Rights Council. It investigates cases of unlawful or arbitrary detention worldwide and bases its opinions on international human rights law.

UN Special Procedures Findings

Between 2024 and 2025, United Nations special procedures intensified scrutiny of Bhutan's treatment of political prisoners, raising serious concerns through formal communications and press releases. In April 2025, six UN Special Rapporteurs on human rights issued a joint statement condemning the prolonged incarceration of political prisoners in Bhutan. They noted that many detainees belonged to the Lhotshampa ethnic minority and had been imprisoned for decades under broadly defined national security and anti-terrorism provisions. The experts described cases of arbitrary detention, limited access to legal representation, and severe restrictions on family contact. They urged the Royal Government of Bhutan to exercise its authority to release these individuals and provide appropriate remedies (Bhutan News Network, 2025).

The statement emphasised that whether or not Bhutan has ratified certain treaties, it is nonetheless obligated to respect customary international law and uphold

fundamental rights, including freedom of expression and fair trials. The experts urged the King to use his prerogatives to grant pardons, citing previous amnesties, and criticised the use of security laws to suppress peaceful dissent.

The findings of the UN special procedures points to the urgent need for legal and institutional reforms in Bhutan when it comes to protecting human rights of the political dissent. The history Bhutan will ignore calls and feedback. This will pose ongoing challenge in improving human rights situation in the country, particularly regarding freedom of expression, non-discrimination, and fair trial guarantees. The experts' recommendations call for immediate remedial action, release of political prisoners, and alignment of Bhutanese law with international human rights standards (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

EU Advocacy

The European Union (EU) has made the situation of political prisoners in Bhutan a central focus of its human rights engagement with Bhutan. In April 2025, Members of the European Parliament wrote to Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay, expressing serious concern about the ongoing detention of these individuals and urging their immediate release (Bhutan News Network, 2025).

The letter, signed by senior Members of the European Parliament, including the chairs of key parliamentary committees, emphasised the human rights consequences of prolonged detention and suggested that the release of political prisoners would be welcomed by the international community and would strengthen Bhutan's bilateral relations with the EU (Bhutan News Network, 2025). This diplomatic intervention from EU is the call for respect the fundamental freedoms and legal transparency as essential components of international cooperation and development partnerships.

Human rights organisations have echoed these calls, urging the EU to continue pressing Bhutanese authorities to release those imprisoned solely for exercising their political rights and to ensure detention conditions meet international standards (AI 2025) . Despite these efforts, progress has been slow

The EU's persistent focus on political prisoners shows how international actors can play a important role in advocating for human rights and legal accountability, even where domestic constraints slow the pace of change. Combining diplomatic pressure with support for civil society remains essential to achieving sustainable improvements in human rights protections in Bhutan.

Civil Society Advocacy and GCRPPB

Over the past two years, the Global Campaign for the Release of Political Prisoners in Bhutan (GCRPPB) has carried out a sustained and increasingly visible international advocacy effort aimed at securing the release of these political prisoners. Its activities have spanned diplomatic engagement, participation in United Nations mechanisms, public demonstrations, and targeted appeals to influential governments and institutions.

A major component of GCRPPB's work has been its engagement with the United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process. In 2024, the organisation submitted its position to the UPR Working Group and participated in the UPR pre session in Geneva, where it presented its concerns regarding Bhutan's continued detention of political prisoners (GCRPPB, 2024). During Bhutan's fourth UPR cycle, GCRPPB representatives attended the 47th UPR session in Geneva, where more than 25 UN member states issued recommendations supporting the release of Bhutanese political prisoners—an unprecedented level of international recognition for the issue (Nepal Live Today, 2024 November 11). This marked a significant milestone in the organisation's diplomatic advocacy, demonstrating growing global awareness of Bhutan's human rights shortcomings.

In addition to UN based advocacy, GCRPPB has also engaged directly with influential political blocs. In April 2025, the organisation urged the European Union to prioritise human rights concerns—including the release of political prisoners—during the 13th EU–Bhutan Annual Consultations in Thimphu. GCRPPB framed the consultations as a critical opportunity for the EU to press Bhutan on longstanding issues such as political imprisonment and the treatment of displaced Bhutanese citizens. This outreach reflects the organisation's strategy of leveraging high level diplomatic platforms to increase pressure on Bhutan's government.

Public mobilisation has also been central to GCRPPB's activities. In June 2024, the organisation coordinated a peaceful rally at the Pennsylvania State Capitol Complex in Harrisburg, USA, calling for the release of Bhutanese political prisoners. The event brought together former political prisoners, human rights leaders, scholars, community representatives, and youth activists, demonstrating broad diaspora support for the cause and helping to maintain public visibility for the issue (Pahichan, 2024).

GCRPPB has also used symbolic global occasions to amplify its message. On the 77th International Human Rights Day in December 2025, the organisation issued a public appeal urging the Bhutanese government to immediately release all remaining political detainees, many of whom have been imprisoned for decades. It simultaneously called on the international community to intensify diplomatic pressure on Bhutan to ensure their safe and unconditional release (Republica, 2025).

Recommendations

Bhutan has long way to go in policy changes to address human rights issues. Policy measures to address the situation of political detainees in Bhutan should begin with legal reform, including amendments to the National Security Act. This would ensure that peaceful political activity is not criminalised. The legal amendment should go parallel with the release of those detainees imprisoned under its provisions.

Bhutan should establish an independent review mechanism to examine long-term political convictions. This mechanism should revisit the cases of the political prisoners to determine whether political activism is really terrorism and threat to the national security. The mechanism should pave way for implementation of the recommendations made by the United Nations.

Greater international engagement is also essential. This include facilitating access for UN special procedures to independently assess the situation of political detention and treatment, with assurance the prisoners would not be mistreated based on their statement to the visiting mission. There should be ongoing diplomatic monitoring.

The civil society support must be strengthened by empowering Bhutanese and diaspora organisations working to promote human rights. The existing media outlets and civil society organisations (CSO) should be allowed to speak out about the political detention to open on healthy debate on democracy and people's sacrifices for political liberalisation. The CSOs should be empowered for independent reporting on detention conditions and to hold government institutions accountable.

Conclusion

Political detention in Bhutan remains a pressing human rights concern. Evidence from NGOs, UN mechanisms, the Fourth UPR, media, and civil society advocacy

demonstrates persistent issues despite state denial. Bhutan's image of being the land of gross national happiness and a peaceful democratic country has been deeply degraded due to the consistent deteriorating situation of political prisoners and its consistent denial of their existence. Bhutan has a very good opportunity to secure international support, given its need for such support more than ever, by granting timely pardons to all these political prisoners and rehabilitating them with proper compensation.

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