

Political Representation in GMC

ABSTRACT

The Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) is established as an independent entity with executive, legislative and judiciary independence. The city is unlikely to have political independence though. The 'one country, two systems' which is rarely practiced around the world except for the case of Hong Kong and Macau when they were returned to China from colonial powers. While these two territories were returning to their homeland from foreign rule, the GMC proposition is the other way round – Bhutan wants to separate Gelephu from its conservative rule and give some autonomy. In Hong Kong and Macau, the civil society had practiced the democratic exercise and enjoyed civil liberties which were essential to maintain the social fabric upon their return to China. In Gelephu, residents have not lived to adopt liberal thoughts or nurture the culture of democracy. This basic difference will determine the success of a 'one country, two system' test in Bhutan.

Keywords: one country two systems, democracy, liberty, freedom, independence

Political History of Gelephu

There are no definitive records of when Gelephu came under the influence of Bhutanese rulers. It is most likely the administrative control over the southern region affirmed following the war with British India in 1864-65 and signing a treaty at Sinchula. However, there were no affirmative leadership taking charge of the region for several centuries prior to inauguration of Wangchuk House in Bhutan.

Even after the inauguration of monarchy, Thimphu did not pay attention to the southern belt. The first two kings mostly spent their times consolidating powers and eliminating potential threats to their dynastical continuity. The region was demarcated under the authority of Paro Penlop until the institution of Chichap (regional governorship) system in 1955. Lhotsam Chichab was established in 1955 and Shompangkha was selected as the administrative centre. Later the Chichab system was reorganised to create Sarbhong district with the appointment of/alteration of the term Chichab to Dzongdag in 1973.

In 1975, the district administration was shifted to Gelephu where the old Dungkhag (sub-district) office now stands. However, following requests from Shompangkha residents, the administrative centre was relocated back to Shompangkha and a Dungkhag Administration was created for Gelephu. The Dungkhag Administration was moved to Umling (Lalai) in 2019 while Gelephu metropolis remains the commercial hub.

Jai Gorkha and Bhutan State Congress

The political activism in southern Bhutan reached its height in 1950s with separate but overlapping activism by Jai Gorkha members and Bhutan State Congress (BSC) (Hutt, 2011). These uprising were primarily concentrated in Sarpang district, with some impact seen in south-west Samtse. Both these uprising was the result of political consciousness among the Nepali community.

The Jai Gorkha movement of the 1950s marks a significant chapter in the political history of Bhutan, Sarpang district in particular, where the GMC locates. This movement, driven by the aspirations of the Nepali-speaking community in southern Bhutan, sought greater socio-cultural freedom and better representation in Thimphu. This

period saw series of political demonstrations and demands that were reflective of the broader socio-political changes occurring in Bhutan and in neighbouring countries such as India and Nepal, at the time.

The Jai Gorkha and BSC movement emerged from the socio-political context of southern Bhutan led by Nepali speaking population, who had then identified as Gorkhas. Nepalis had settled in Bhutan for several generations and played a crucial role in the region's agriculture and local economy. Despite their significant presence, they faced various socio-political challenges, including limited representation in the central governance structure and restrictions on cultural and linguistic expression.

The movement's leaders organised protests and rallies, calling for:

- *Greater Political Representation:* The Gorkha (*sic*) community demanded more significant representation in the government, both at the local and national levels. They sought to have their voices heard in the decision-making processes that affected their lives and communities.
- *Protection of Cultural Rights:* The movement emphasised the need to preserve and promote the cultural and linguistic heritage of the Gorkhas. This included the right to education in the Nepali language and the freedom to practice their cultural traditions.
- *Land and Economic Rights:* The Gorkhas also sought guarantees for their land rights and economic opportunities. Many members of the community were involved in agriculture, and land ownership was a critical issue for their livelihood and stability.

The movement forced Thimphu to modernise its governance frameworks. Several political reforms were introduced following this, even though the changes introduced thereafter did not fully address the concerns raised by the Nepali community.

The Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB)'s response to the Jai Gorkha movement was multifaceted. While there were efforts to address some of the community's concerns through policy adjustments and increased dialogue, the government took measures to suppress the movement. This included arrests of key leaders, dispersal of protests, and restrictions on political activities.

The suppression of the movement had significant consequences for the Nepali community. Many faced increased scrutiny and pressure, leading to a sense of disenfranchisement and alienation. Thousands of southern Bhutanese were forcibly exiled and never returned. The Jai Gorkha and BSC movement of the 1950s left a lasting impact on Bhutan's political history. It brought to the forefront issues of minority rights, cultural preservation, and political representation that would continue to shape the country's socio-political discourse in the years to come.

The movement underscored the need for inclusive governance and the recognition of diverse cultural identities within the national fabric. In subsequent decades, Bhutan has made efforts to address some of these challenges through various reforms and policies aimed at promoting social cohesion and equitable development.

Looking to the future, the legacy of the Jai Gorkha and BSC movement serves as a reminder of the importance of dialogue, inclusivity, and respect for cultural diversity in building a harmonious and prosperous nation. The continued evolution of Bhutan's political

structure, including discussions around political autonomy and local governance, reflects an ongoing commitment to balancing national unity with the aspirations of its diverse communities.

Call For Reforms in 1990s

Gelephu remained at the forefront of political consciousness in southern Bhutan. Gelephu remained the one of the major locations that king regularly travelled and gave his speech on National Day celebrations. King Jigme Singye Wangchuk used Gelephu as the base to propagate his agenda in southern Bhutan.

The city was the major centre of demonstrations in 1990s that called for equitable and fairer treatment of southern Bhutanese and reform of the governance. Large population of Gelephu and its neighbouring regions were forcibly exiled as Bhutan government responded to suppress the voices, turning the business hub into a ghost city.

For more than 75 years since that political upheaval, Gelephu stands as the testament of the cultural and political conflict for greater influences. Despite that Gelephu remains the hope and aspiration of the Bhutanese citizens and the king for economic, political and social transformation.

Local Governments

Gelephu was declared Class A municipality in 2011 with six Demkhongs (cluster of villages) with the population of 12,072 in 2,847 households (Thromde Survey 2020) covering 11.52 sqkm. The municipality operations are divided into eight sectors - Development Regulatory Division, Infrastructure Division, Urban Planning Division, Environment Division, Land Record and Survey Division, Finance Division, Education Sector, and Secretariats Services. This structure ensures comprehensive governance and

service delivery. Sarpang district has 12 Gewogs or blocks of villages – Chhuzagang, Chhudzom, Dekiling, Gakiling, Gelephu, Jigmechhoeling, Samtenling, Senghe, Serzhong, Shompangkha, Tareythang and Umling. Local government at block level is elected periodically, at every 5 years, and are called Gewog Tshogde. After the introduction of parliamentary government in 2008, Dzongkhag Tshogdu or district assembly was instituted.

Dzongkhag Tshogdu, as a highest decision making body in the district, comprises of a Gup (Mandal) and Mangmi (Karbari) as a representative from each gewog and one elected member from Dzongkhag Thromde (Class A municipality) and Dzongkhag Yenla Thromdes (Class B municipality). At the local level, Gelephu Gewog has its own elected representatives, including a Gup and members of the Gewog Tshogde. These representatives are responsible for addressing local issues, facilitating development projects, and voicing the concerns of their constituents. The elected local government members are apolitical and are subject to renounce party membership at least a year before the election nomination are filed.

Sarpang district is represented by two members in the National Assembly and one member in the apolitical upper house National Council. These representatives serve as the connection between voters and the government.

The GMC was created through a royal decree. Traditionally, such administrative restructuring and evolution of power regionalisation in Bhutan had always been through royal orders. The GMC is continuation of the tradition. Its legal and constitutional framework and royal authorities were discussed in other article.

The Special Administrative Region (SAR) includes area that currently operate under local government prescribed by the national constitution. These local governments are still operating despite the formation of SAR. It has not been clear how these local governments would be culminated under SAR or whether they would continue operating under national framework. The current structure of the of local government and its representation in the central parliament/government require an overhaul.

Future Political Structure

The GMC is envision to receive legislative, executive and judiciary separation from the national framework. While the current focus is concentrated on economic development, the political and judicial structure of the SAR is barely discussed.

The King's vision of 'one country, two system' is barely known in the Bhutanese context. The practice is noted only in the case of Hong Kong and Macau. The examples are testimony of opportunities for economic growth as well as political instability. These two autonomous regions in China are ruled with laws that are fundamentally different to that of the mainland China. Bhutan is unlikely to see such contrasting differences between Thimphu and Gelephu. Some of the challenges of 'one country, two system' are:

Legal and Political Differences: The fundamental differences between the legal and political systems of the mainland and the autonomous regions can create conflicts. Balancing these differences while upholding 'one country, two systems' can lead to legal ambiguities and disputes.

Economic Challenges: Bhutan cannot imagine the replication of the capitalist model of Hong Kong and Macau and socialist China.

However, the economic conflict would arise from whether an economically stronger Gelephu likes to contribute for the greater good of weaker Bhutan. While the GMC is independent on its legislative, judiciary and executive authorities, Thimphu has remained silent on its economic independence. This would lead to conflict if an independent legislative and executive of Gelephu decides not to economically contribute for Bhutan's overall development. Maintaining separate economic systems while integrating them under a single national framework can lead to economic disparities, policy conflicts, and potential financial instabilities.

Civil Liberties And Human Rights: Bhutan does not have a good records of human rights. Bhutanese leadership and society in general are not attuned to liberal policies. Political and social hierarchy prevalent in the country take opposition or criticism being threat to their survival. The GMC is more likely to get liberal, considering its exposure to liberal societies, the same level of liberties are unlikely to be maintained in other part of Bhutan.

Socio-Cultural Challenges: Divergent social norms, values, and cultural identities between the mainland and the autonomous regions can lead to social tensions. The fear of cultural assimilation or dilution can fuel unrest and resistance among the local populations. Are liberal residents of Gelephu eager and ready to accept the stricter social and political control while travelling to other parts of Bhutan?

Trust And Perceived Autonomy: Maintaining the trust of the local population in the 'one country, two systems' framework requires clear demonstration of autonomy from the mainland. Any perceived

erosion of autonomy can lead to widespread protests and political unrest, as seen in the 2019–20 Hong Kong protests.

International Relations: The implementation and perception of ‘one country, two systems’ can influence international relations. Is Bhutan ready to let the GMC have its own representations in international bodies like World Trade Organisations, International Olympic and other regional organisations? These autonomy may create fear in Thimphu of its eventual independence.

Implementation And Interpretation: The interpretation of ‘one country, two systems’ can be subjective and change over time. This can lead to inconsistencies in policy application and enforcement, as well as different interpretations by different stakeholders, including the local governments, the central government, and the international community.

The vision for GMC is to be a self-governing entity. Current focus is finding investors. Publicly available documents do not discuss anything about the political structure of the future city.

If the vision is materialised, the region is likely to attract migration from other districts in Bhutan and neighbouring countries, thereby increasing its permanent population to approximately 200,000 (Quendren, 2025 March 22) by 2045. This will be the biggest concentration of Bhutanese population for a country which projects to have less than 900,000 by then (NSB, 2019). Precedence set by the country does not guarantee that these people will not be forcefully evicted from the country in future citing security and other reasons.

Appointment of a governor indicates the GMC being treated as a state of the Bhutanese nation. Hong Kong and Macau, where one country two systems are practised, Chief Executive is equivalent to the governor but is elected by local electoral college, unlike in GMC where governor was appointed by King, who is discussed being the charman (The Bhutanese, 2024 May 10) of the city. The executive, legislative and judiciary are yet to be determined – structures, elections and their authorities.

It is uncertain whether the parliament in Thimphu or the palace will chart out the future power devolution process. If the parliament in Thimphu is bypassed by the GMC, there are fundamental complexities to resolve for the two governments – whether the GMC will be represented at the central parliament through periodic elections on currently delimited constituencies. If the GMC's representation in Thimphu is abolished, there's requirement for structural overhaul of the electoral constituency in Sarpang and allocating the seat to other districts. In such circumstance, it will be matter of discussion whether the existence of Sarpang district hold any significance.

The question of political autonomy for region like Gelephu is complex and intertwined with broader national considerations. Bhutan has historically maintained a strong central government, but there is a growing recognition of the need for regional representation and autonomy in addressing local challenges. The strength of the Bhutanese nationhood would be tested, if the GMC remains within the fabric of the Bhutanese identity without any economic and political conflict with Thimphu.

As Bhutan navigates its development goals, the balance between national unity and local autonomy will be crucial. It will be important

for policymakers to consider the aspirations of local populations while maintaining the integrity of the nation as a whole.

Conclusion

The political structure of the future city is very fluid, complex and conflicting. The power devolution reflects the changing dynamics of governance in Bhutan. It had strong historical significance, poised to maintain that stature, building its economic might, primary location for administration of southern districts Gelephu serves as a microcosm of the broader political landscape in the country. As Bhutan continues to evolve on its democratic tests, the prospects for enhanced local governance and potential political autonomy will play a critical role in shaping the future of Gelephu and its citizens.

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