

Bhutan

Ethnicity in Bhutan

Group selection

Population: Bhutan is a member of the international state system since 1949 when it ended its affiliation with the United Kingdom as its external patron and signed a contract with the newly created Indian Union that foresaw the guidance of India in external relations. In the same year, Bhutan had a population of about 629,260 ⁽³⁷⁷⁾. 58 years later, in 2007, the contract with India was rewritten to explicitly recognize Bhutan's sovereignty although Bhutan still relies on Indian military assistance. Bhutan has been a member of the United Nations since 1971.

³⁷⁷ [Gleditsch, 2010]

Population numbers in Bhutan should be used with caution since official estimates vary drastically. In 2005, Bhutan conducted its first modern census and arrived at a population of just over 700,000 ⁽³⁷⁸⁾. Earlier estimates were put at over 2 million ⁽³⁷⁹⁾. The discrepancy has possibly two sources. First, Bhutan supposedly fabricated its population numbers when entering the UN in 1971 in order to get above 1 million inhabitants. Subsequent estimates build on this number and calculated later population estimates based on yearly population growth and the false base estimate. A second estimate goes to the heart of the problem of ethnicity in the country. Long-standing Nepalese immigrants that are supposed to make up over 35 % of the population claim that Bhutan has forged the 2005 census and under-counted people of Nepalese origin.

³⁷⁸ [CIA, 2011]

³⁷⁹ [Gleditsch, 2010]

Political system: Bhutan has been a hereditary monarchy since 1907. It became a constitutional monarchy in 1960 and made some moves towards democratization in 2008. However, Freedom House ⁽³⁸⁰⁾ notes that "Bhutan is not an electoral democracy," citing, inter alia, problems with freedom of expression and association during electoral campaigns. Executive power lies with the king and his family.

³⁸⁰ [Freedom House, 2011]

In its 2013 Report, Freedom House notes that "Bhutan IS an electoral democracy (emphasis added), with the Cabinet increasingly taking on a governing role, rather than simply deferring to the King for guidance. Similarly, in its 2013 Country Report on Human Rights Practices, the US State Department declares Bhutan a democratic, constitutional monarchy, which, following a gradual transition towards democracy, held its second, generally termed free and fair - general elections in July 2012 (similar observations by Freedom

House, 2013). These elections were contested by 5 parties, up from 2 in the 2008 national elections, and resulted in the country's first democratic transfer of power to the opposition, from the Druk Phensum Tshogpa (Bhutan Peace and Prosperity Party) to the People's Democratic Party. Nevertheless, despite these improvements, the political system continues to be dominated by political parties with ties to the royal family, (and) it appears unlikely that the Assembly will resist many of the policies and proposals favored by the King. The monarch continues to wield substantial formal and informal powers⁽³⁸¹⁾. The 2012 Freedom House report adds that the 2008 Constitution, which provided for parliamentary democracy, upholds the primacy of the Monarchy. At the same time, fractionalist participation in politics continues to be widespread, and freedom of assembly and association continue to be restricted⁽³⁸²⁾. In view of the above, executive power clearly remains with the King^(383; 384), fulfilling the expectations of observers of Bhutanese politics that the democratic reforms would only be cosmetic while real power stayed with the King⁽³⁸⁵⁾.

³⁸¹ [Polity IV, 2010]

³⁸² [Polity IV, 2010]

³⁸³ [Polity IV, 2010]

³⁸⁴ [US State Department, 2013]

³⁸⁵ [Polity IV, 2010]

Ethnic groups: According to Parmanand^(386, 102), Bhutan is inhabited by five ethnic groups. **Sharchops** (the largest group, speak Tsangla), **Ngalops** (Ngalung or Bhote - people of Bhote or Tibet - speak the national language Dzonkha), Bumthaps and Kurtops (two smaller tribal groups) belong to the **Drupka** cultural group. All four sub-groups practice Buddhism and live in the northern, central and eastern parts of the country. The fifth group are the **Lhotsampa** or Nepalese immigrants.

³⁸⁶ [Parmanand, 1998]

Power relations

Bhutanese (Drupka): Ngalops & Sharchops: Historically, the Ngalops constituted the ruling elite and integrated the Sharchops through conversion to Buddhism into mainstream Buddhist society (cf. ³⁸⁷). Rizal provides a more detailed analysis of Drupka identity. According to him, Drupkas are a specific sect within Mahayana (Kargupa) Buddhism that is practiced by the Ngalops. The Sharchops, on the other hand, follow Nyingmapa Buddhism^(388, 153). In 1979, the King Jigme Singye Wangchuck from the Ngalop background made a closer connection with families from the Drupka Buddhist tradition through marriage. Freedom House names the ruling ethnic group Drupka-Ngalop.

³⁸⁷ [Worden, 1991]

³⁸⁸ [Rizal, 2004]

The Sharchops are the larger group and are racially and linguistically distinct from the Ngalops but culturally integrated. According to Rizal^(389, 161), they do possess some government positions but since they are not part of the royal family their executive power remains constrained. Given the assimilation between the two groups, and no obvious political mobilization of the Sharchops, the Ngalops and Sharchops are coded as one group (**Bhutatense**) until 1988, when the royal bond to Drupka identity was made explicit (through official marriage - the marriage in 1977 was private - and laws; cf.

³⁸⁹ [Rizal, 2004]

³⁹⁰, 157).

Thereafter, Ngalops and Sharchops are considered as separate groups. Although there is some inclusion of Sharchops in government, "the structure of the political system in Bhutan sustains domination of national policy mostly by Ngalung elites." (³⁹¹, 161). The South Asian Terrorism Portal (³⁹²) succinctly adds: "The minority Ngalongs ... occupy almost every position of any consequence in the country." Since democratic reforms in 2007 only slightly altered the power balance, Sharchops are coded as powerless from 1989 onwards.

Together the two groups constitute between 50% and 72% of the population (see discussion of Lhotsampa population share below). Sharchops make up 30-40% of the population and Ngalops 10-25%.

In recent years, Bhutan showed further signs of democratic consolidation (³⁹³). ³⁹⁴ notes that, "Bhutan has made a rapid transition from a system in which the monarch and his advisers had enormous influence over Parliament to one in which Parliament determines its own policies" and the cabinet is selected by the ruling party. Compared to his predecessor, the current Prime Minister, Tshering Tobgay, is said to show more signs of independence (*ibid*). Also, the 2013 election was contested by more parties and candidates compared to the previous one(³⁹⁵).

Nevertheless, the King retains substantial influence. Although he has shown continued support for the democratic reform of the country (³⁹⁶), executive power, officially vested in the cabinet (³⁹⁷), remains overwhelmingly in his hands. In this regard, the Bertelsmann Stiftung (2016) mentions him as an important, and perhaps the only, potential domestic veto player, who is a part of the parliament and has the power of assent for bills. The King also continues to wield substantial informal power, bolstered by the wide support and status Bhutan's monarchy still enjoys (*ibid*). Reflecting this, the country's small political elite shows consistent loyalty to the state and the King (*ibid*), together with whom they largely control access to political office (³⁹⁸): electoral rules remain largely determined from above, and "it seems the delimitation of districts and the whole election exercise was premeditated and orchestrated regarding who should win, how many candidates would be fielded from the Lhotsampa and Sharchop community, and who among the Lhotsampas and Sharchops would get tickets for contesting the election."

The current cabinet comprises of three Ministers as well as the Prime Minister and Deputy Speaker from the West, a primarily Ngalop region, three Ministers and the Speaker from the East, which is predominantly inhabited by the Sharchops, one from the Centre, and three from the South, the region of the Lhotsampa (³⁹⁹). Yet, according to ⁴⁰⁰ only one is intended for the latter group. Moreover, judging by surnames, Ministers affiliated with the Dorji and Wangchuk families, both which are powerful political families with links to the Monarchy, are in clear majority. Considered the "most assertive group" (⁴⁰¹: 82), Ngalops thus undoubtedly continue to dominate national politics in Bhutan.

³⁹⁰ [Rizal, 2004]

³⁹¹ [Rizal, 2004]

³⁹² [South Asian Terrorism Portal, 2001]

³⁹³ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016]

³⁹⁴ [Freedom House, 2016]

³⁹⁵ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016]

³⁹⁶ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016]

³⁹⁷ [US State Department, 2016]

³⁹⁸ [Rizal, 2015]

³⁹⁹ [Rizal, 2015]

⁴⁰⁰ [Rizal, 2015]

⁴⁰¹ [Monaco, 2017]

Lhotsampa (Hindu Nepalese): Large-scale immigration started in 1865 for economic reasons. Nepali migrants were supposed to make the hostile part of southern Bhutan hospitable and cultivate it. The Bhutanese state started collecting taxes from the Nepali settlers (402) soon after their arrival. The Bhutanese officially ended migration in 1958 and started naturalizing Nepalis who were by now called Lhotsampa (people from the South). Official policy had however little influence on Nepalis' continued migration into southern Bhutan where they found an almost homogenous community of their kin. The Lhotsampa founded the Bhutan State Congress, the first political party in the country, in 1952 and demanded official citizenship rights. These were granted in 1958 (403, 155).

402 [Upreti, 1998]

Nepali population numbers are heavily contested. Upreti (404, 81) puts them at around 20%. The government of Bhutan estimates 15% and a commission of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation even puts them at 50%. The CIA World Factbook (405) gives an estimate of 35%. Rizal (406) reports a number between 30% and 45%. It appears reasonable to opt for 30% as a compromise prior to 1988 and 20% afterwards. While the Nepali settlers constitute one ethnic group in Bhutan, they are actually a mixture of several different ethnicities from the hill parts of Nepal - "Brahmins and Thakuris, Newars, Kiratis, Rai, Gurung, Limbu etc." (407, 81). The Nepalis speak Nepali, are predominantly Hindu and follow cultural patterns that are distinct from the Buddhist Drupka traditions.

403 [Rizal, 2004]

404 [Upreti, 1998]

405 [CIA, 2011]

406 [Rizal, 2004]

407 [Upreti, 1998]

Until the mid 1980s ethnicity was mostly accommodated in Bhutan by cultural and social prerogatives given to the different ethnic segments. While political power lay with the king, and the Lhotsampa could not attain executive power, they were granted citizenship and an overall inclusive policy was followed. Following the alliance between the king and members of the Buddhist Drupka sect in the late 1970s, the policy toward the Lhotsampa changed. In 1988, a law was introduced that severely restricted citizenship rights for the Lhotsampa (408, 158-9), and even resulted in the withdrawal of citizenship from 1000s of Nepali speakers (409; Freedom House 2012/2013). Subsequent protests by the Lhotsampa were met with violent repression and led to the forceful expulsion of over 100,000 Lhotsampa to India and Nepal.

408 [Rizal, 2004]

409 [Polity IV, 2010]

In recent years, numerous obstacles prevented the Lhotsampa from participating effectively in Bhutanese politics: many were barred from voting after they were counted as non-nationals in the 2005 census, while the requirement of a security clearance certificate for candidates made it difficult for them to run in the elections (Freedom House, 2012). Also, the Druk National Congress, which was established by Bhutanese refugees in exile in 1994, was prohibited from carrying out activities inside Bhutan (410). The Bhutan People's United Party, which represents the interests of the Lhotsampa, was denied registration (411; Freedom House, 2012). There are also some indications that Hindu Nepalese were subjected to discrimination in employment, especially in the civil service and in government jobs

410 [US State Department, 2013]

411 [Polity IV, 2010]

(⁴¹²). Similarly, the teaching of Nepali and Sanskrit is banned and permits for Hindu temples are difficult to obtain (⁴¹³; ⁴¹⁴). Finally, regarding the Nepali-speaking Bhutanese refugees, their identification and repatriation continues to be delayed, even though the majority has proof of citizenship (⁴¹⁵; ⁴¹⁶; ⁴¹⁷). As such, 54,000 remain in camps in Nepal, while thousands have been re-settled in third countries. Bhutanese refugees who were demonstrating for their right to return home faced arrest (⁴¹⁸). Given this situation, the current coding of discriminated can be extended through 2013.

The ⁴¹⁹ emphasizes that Nepali-speaking political prisoners remain incarcerated for their alleged role in anti-government protests during the 1990s (although according to Freedom House (2016), 14 prisoners have been released since 2010 – but it is unclear whether they belong to the Lhotsampa group). Whether at the local or national level, to date, no candidates have been willing to address the Lhotsampa issue, and the topic remains a taboo in the public domain (⁴²⁰). Parties established by ethnic-Nepalis are considered illegal and operate only outside Bhutan, and although requirements for citizenship have been clarified, many Lhotsampas still only have resident status (⁴²¹). The government also continues to refuse readmission of Lhotsampa refugees (⁴²²; ⁴²³), with 18,000-30,000 still in Nepal as of 2015 and many now resettled in third countries (⁴²⁴; ⁴²⁵).

Indigenous Tribal People: "The indigenous tribal peoples live in villages scattered across Bhutan. They include the Kheng, Brokpa, Lepcha, Tibetan, Adhivasi and Toktop, all of which are on a much smaller scale than the three major ethnic groups. Some of these ethnic groups are culturally and linguistically of Tibetan or Indian Buddhist tradition, while some are influenced by the populations of West Bengal or Assam and embrace the Hindu social system" (⁴²⁶, 153). Tribals account for up to 15% of the Bhutanese population. Tribals are neither mobilized nor are they actively targeted by the government which is why they are coded as politically irrelevant.

⁴¹² [US State Department, 2013]

⁴¹³ [US State Department, 2013]

⁴¹⁴ [Freedom House, 2011]

⁴¹⁹ [US State Department, 2016]

⁴²⁰ [Banki, 2014]

⁴²¹ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016]

⁴²² [US State Department, 2016]

⁴²³ [Freedom House, 2016]

⁴²⁶ [Rizal, 2004]

Bibliography

- [Banki, 2014] Banki, Susan. (2014). Finding a Future for Minorities in Bhutan's Emerging Democracy. East Asia Forum. Retrieved on 13.10.2017 from: <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/05/29/finding-a-future-for-minorities-in-bhutans-emerging-democracy/>
- [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016] Bertelsmann Stiftung. (2016). Bhutan Country Report. Transformation Index BTI. Retrieved on 13.10.2017 from: <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/BTN/>
- [CIA, 2011] CIA. (2011). CIA world fact book: Bhutan - population. Retrieved on 30 April 2011 from: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bt.html>
- [Freedom House, 2011] Freedom House (2011). Freedom of the world: Bhutan. Retrieved on 30 April 2011 from: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&country=7784&year=2010>
- [Freedom House, 2016] Freedom House. (2016). Freedom in the World 2016: Bhutan. Retrieved on 13.10.2017 from: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/bhutan>
- [Gleditsch, 2010] Gleditsch, K.S. (2010). Expanded population data. Retrieved on 30 April 2011 from: <http://privatwww.essex.ac.uk/~ksg/data/exppop.txt>
- [Monaco, 2017] Monaco, Edoardo. (2017). Preserving Bhutan's National Identity: An Analysis of Gross National Happiness as Survival Strategy. European Journal of Sustainable Development, 6(3):81-91.
- [Parmanand, 1998] Parmanand. (1998). Bhutan's problem of ethnicity: Causes, consequences and prospects. In Ramakant & Misra (Eds.), Bhutan: Society and polity. University of Rajasthan: South Asia Books.
- [Polity IV, 2010] Polity IV. (2010). Bhutan, Æi country report 2010. Retrieved on 22 May 2014 from: <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/Bhutan2010.pdf>

- [Rizal, 2004] Rizal, Dhurba. (2004). The unknown refugee crisis: Expulsion of the ethnic Lhotsampa from Bhutan. *Asian Ethnicity*, 5(2), 151 - 177.
- [Rizal, 2015] Rizal, Dhurba. (2015). *The Royal Semi-Authoritarian Democracy of Bhutan*. Lexington Books.
- [South Asian Terrorism Portal, 2001] South Asian Terrorism Portal. (2001). Bhutan backgrounder. New Delhi: Institute for Conflict Management. Retrieved on 30 April 2011 from: <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/bhutan/backgrounders/index.html#>
- [Upreti, 1998] Upreti, B.C. (1998). The Nepali immigrants in Bhutan: Growing conflict between national and ethnic identities. In Ramakant & Misra (Eds.), *Bhutan: Society and polity*. University of Rajasthan: South Asia Books.
- [US State Department, 2013] US State Department. (2013). Bhutan, 2013 country reports on human rights practices. Retrieved on 22 May 2014 from: <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm#wrapper>
- [US State Department, 2016] US State Department. (2016). Bhutan – 2016 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices. Retrieved on 13.10.2017 from: <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm#wrapper>
- [Worden, 1991] Worden, R.L. (1991). Ethnic groups. In A.M. Savada (Ed.), *Bhutan: A country study*. Library of Congress Federal Research Division.

Political status of ethnic groups in Bhutan

From 1949 until 1988

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Bhutanese	0.5	MONOPOLY
Lhotsampa (Hindu Nepalese)	0.35	POWERLESS

From 1989 until 2017

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Sharchops	0.4	POWERLESS
Lhotsampa (Hindu Nepalese)	0.2	DISCRIMINATED
Ngalops (Drupka)	0.2	MONOPOLY



Figure 72: Political status of ethnic groups in Bhutan during 1949-1988.



Figure 73: Political status of ethnic groups in Bhutan during 1989-2017.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Bhutan

From 1949 until 1988



Figure 74: Map of ethnic groups in Bhutan during 1949-1988.

Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■ Bhutanese	39 906	Aggregate
■ Lhotsampa (Hindu Nepalese)	4134	Regionally based

Table 25: List of ethnic groups in Bhutan during 1949-1988.

From 1989 until 2017

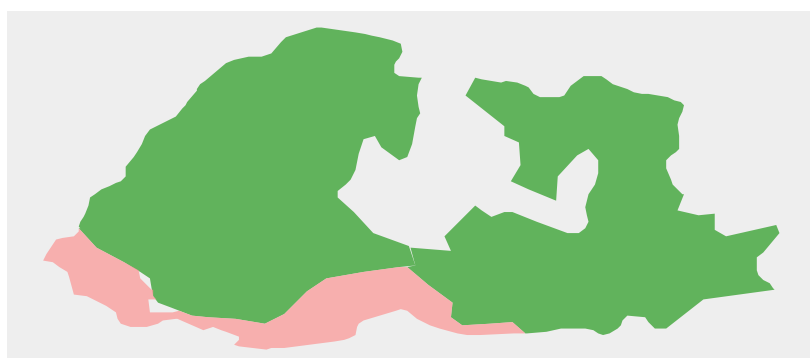


Figure 75: Map of ethnic groups in Bhutan during 1989-2017.

	Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■	Ngalops (Drupka)	15 871	Regionally based
■	Sharchops	13 080	Regionally based
■	Lhotsampa (Hindu Nepalese)	4134	Regionally based

Table 26: List of ethnic groups in Bhutan during 1989-2017.