

Accountability and Gross National Happiness

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Accountability is a critical element in determining good and effective government. Since the success of development efforts largely depends on the accountability of those involved in the process, there is a need to enforce and promote accountability in the public service. There is also a need to assess the extent to which accountability measures have contributed to make government administrative machinery more efficient, effective and responsive to the needs of the people.

In my paper, I will attempt to examine the relationship between the issues of public accountability and the development philosophy of His Majesty the King: 'Gross National Happiness' and the implications of this relationship on these issues.

Before discussing this relationship, we need to know what is 'Gross National Happiness'.

His Majesty the King “.. has been the fountain-head of philosophy, concepts and policies of our national development for nearly three decades. It has always been His conviction that the ultimate purpose of the government is to promote the happiness of the people. It was this belief that inspired him to state that 'Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product', whereby happiness takes precedence over economic prosperity in our national development process...Gross National Happiness best captures our distinct perception, rooted in our philosophical and political thought, of the main purpose of development” (H.E. Lyonpo

Jigmi Y. Thinley, 1998).

Under the vision of 'Gross National Happiness', special importance and priority have been given to the goals of 'Cultural Promotion' and 'Good Governance'. These two goals, which are complementary and mutually reinforcing, have causal relationship with the issues of public accountability in Bhutan.

Accountability and Good Governance

The notion that one has to bear the Karma (Cause - Effect) of one's act is deeply rooted in the Bhutanese psyche. In this sense, the notion of accountability is not new to Bhutan. However, the concept of administrative accountability was introduced and operationalized only with the launching of the country's 1st Five-Year Plan in the early sixties. The implementation of the 1st Plan necessitated increases, not only in the employment of large number of government employees, but also in the scope of their operations. And consequently, the establishment of a permanent professional civil service. A number of well defined rules, regulations and provisions were promulgated by the government to guide the civil servants. As a corollary to the above, the civil servants' accountability was visualized in terms of an adherence to the rules and regulations and their obligation to carry out assigned activities in a responsible and responsive manner.

Since the sixties to this date, various processes as an institution of administrative accountability have been developed and fine-tuned to enhance and promote accountability especially in the public sector - some of which have been highlighted hereunder:

Institutionalization of the traditional system for redressing grievances: Under this tradition, any citizen can report personally to His Majesty the King to redress his

grievances. This not only provides a citizen an avenue for impartial scrutiny of his case but also for countering the annoying inaccessibility of bureaucrats and official procedures. This also discourages the bureaucrats from making decisions on flimsy, casual or prejudicial grounds.

Legislative mechanism: At the national level, the people participate in the Tshogdu or National Assembly, through their elected representatives in enacting laws and in reviewing and approving the government's annual budget and development plans. The representatives also exercise in a fairly wide-ranging manner, reasonable control over administrative activity of the government and its ministries and divisions. They can question and debate on any action of the government and keep themselves abreast of the policies and functioning of the government through reports which must be submitted to the Tshogdu.

Administrative and fiscal accountability: In Bhutan, all financial authorities are derived from the Tshogdu and delegated to various agencies of the government. These agencies are responsible for ensuring proper receipt, management and utilization of funds, and also for ensuring economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the administration/management of the government funds. The main agency involved in the financial process is the Ministry of Finance, who is responsible for: (a) formulating the fiscal policies of the Royal Government (b) formulating financial rules and regulations with regard to the use of public fund (c) regulating the executing agencies via budgetary control and financial regulations with regard to the government fund made available to them (d) mobilizing domestic revenues (e) regulating the central level financial institution like the Royal Monetary Authority and through it other financial institutions (for example, Bank of Bhutan) in the country (f) carrying out administrative responsibilities with respect to public fund, such as, proper compilation of

budgetary accounts, preparation of the National Accounts, etc. and (g) Preparation and submission of the government's annual report on the financial status of the country to the Tshogdu.

Royal Audit Authority (RAA): is an autonomous organization headed by an Auditor General. His office audits financial transaction of the government and the accounts of all public enterprises on the basis of efficiency, effectiveness and economy. He has been given absolute right of access to the accounts and related documents and to comment on it. According to the General Auditing Rules and Regulations (GARR) of 1989, the RAA has the power to audit, partially or fully, and present the facts during the audit. The RAA can also point out the negligence in fulfilling accountability by the civil servants. It is the RAA's duty to bring to notice the extravaganzas, wastage and frauds committed by agencies entrusted to manage the developmental activities in a desired manner.

Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC): is an independent and autonomous body. Under its Royal Charter, the RCSC is entrusted with the following responsibilities: "(i) to formulate, review and ensure implementation of personnel policies and Civil Service Rules and Regulations in order to ensure efficiency and effectiveness in the civil service; (ii) to formulate, review, and ensure implementation of a national system of administration for recruitment, appointment, transfer, promotion, reward, discipline, conduct and separation of civil servants; and (iii) to motivate and promote morale, loyalty and integrity among civil servants by ensuring uniformity of personnel actions" (RCSC). Within the above context, the RCSC has defined a "Code of Conduct and Ethics" for the civil servants. It has also laid down certain disciplinary rules and regulations for the civil servants.

The process of political and administrative decentralization initiated by His Majesty the King led to a paradigm shift in planning and implementation of development activities calling for greater transparency and greater accountability. Under this process, in every dzongkhag in the country, a DYT (Dzongkha acronym for a district development committee) was set-up to bring about an involvement of the people through their elected representatives in the developmental activities of their districts. "This has strengthened village and community structures and enhanced responsiveness and transparency of the government". (H. E. Lyonpo Jigmi Y. Thinley, 1998)

In 1991, His Majesty the King instituted a GYT (Dzongkha acronym for a geog/block development committee) in every geog of the country. "The objective of establishing a GYT was to promote further decentralization by taking the decision-making process to the village level and to develop greater political consciousness among the people. A GYT is the executive body of the gewog zomdu (gathering in a gewog). Thus, a GYT provides the people with an institutional means to carry out the decisions, which they may arrive at during a gewog zomdu. It also helps to regenerate a sense of control, ownership and responsibility for the maintenance of collective local resources that had declined with a concomitant rise in the bureaucratic power"(Karma Ura,).

The 1998 devolution of power initiated by His Majesty the King marks the dawning of a new era in the country's political history.

"The greatest change in the devolution of power took place in June 1998 when His Majesty the King devolved full executive powers on the Council of Ministers that was elected by the National Assembly of Bhutan. The King relinquished his position as the head of government and, much against the earnest

appeal of the National Assembly, even pushed through a hitherto inconceivable mechanism for a vote of confidence that can require him to abdicate. Such changes are part of a continuous process that is consistent with the commitment to good governance and the vision of enlightenment and happiness of the people" (H. E. Lyonpo Jigmi Y. Thinley, 1998).

The operational implications of the devolution are still in the process of evolution. Nevertheless, it would be safe to say that the devolution will deepen the peoples' involvement at all levels of the government and thereby further enhance the effectiveness of public accountability.

There is a tendency of looking at accountability and other related problems, for example, corruption and bribery, as if they are the problems peculiar to the government. This implies that only the conducts of the civil servants are subject to the rules of ethics, religious and moral values. Obviously, this is not correct. Moreover, if we look at accountability as simply a problem of the government alone, we will not be forced to analyze the interdependence of accountability problems. If the government employee alone has to have rectitude, the society will not change because the source of bribes, the petitioner for unfair and social privileges and the manipulator for self interest remains. In fact, if the question of accountability is examined closely, we will be convinced that focusing accountability on the government alone is a very limited perspective. This is simply because the values enshrined in the government are also the same values that the society at large must manifest in the joint venture towards achieving the goals of 'Happiness'. In this regard, we also need to bear in mind that the root words of the Bhutanese developmental philosophy - "Gross" and "National" - implies that the philosophy needs to be seen in the context of the nation as a whole. And

“Happiness” as “the ultimate desire of every human being. All else is a means to achieve this end. It should logically follow then that all individual and collective efforts should be devoted to this common goal” (H. E. Lyonpo Jigmi Y. Thinley, 1998). Therefore, the development of accountability should be in consonance with the enhancement of 'Happiness' in the society.

Accountability and Cultural Promotion

The central ethos of Bhutan's culture is quintessentially Buddhist. Within such cultural construct, there is a clear understanding among the individuals of the implications of the doctrine of Karma.

'All that we are the result of what we have thought, all that we shall be is the result of what we are thinking now. We are building now our tomorrow. Hence, every man is free within the limitations of his self-created karma, result of past actions of our body, speech and thought'.

Thus, the doctrine of Karma removes the excuse so constantly put forward for evil doing, that 'I could not help it, for my hands were tied'.

Such understanding of the individuals regarding the doctrine of Karma must provide the basis for setting up the standards of accountability in Bhutan. For the standards must reflect our cultural values. It must reflect our moral, our sense of individual responsibility for ourselves and for the communities around us. The standard should not be such that it subtly absolves us of our individual responsibilities towards our society.

In the above context, we must be aware of cynicism that increasingly views accountability as the process of exercising

one's ability to explain one's accounts. In other words, as long as every rule and procedure have been followed, one is accountable and will be considered as having discharged his duties well. Clearly, the above concept of accountability is negative and unproductive. The positive concept of accountability requires a thread of moral code to run through its process. This means that accountability can be interpreted to cover that extensive aspect of one's own behavior including one's internal behavior. The latter, which only one knows, determines the degree of conscientiousness and responsibility that one shows in the discharge of one's duty. While it is very difficult to check or monitor one's inner behavior, the latter explains the fact that the same job is performed differently in terms of both quality and quantity by different individuals given the same authority, power, job specifications, resources and environment. Incorporating the highest moral code in its standards, therefore, can enhance accountability.

Quest for 'Happiness' requires the standards of accountability, which is based on the principle of the doctrine of Karma, be brought down to everyday life and activity of the people. This means that the terms of accountability must be restated in the context of individual effort - that is, the effort of the individual must transcend his baser human instincts.

In the above context, one of the major challenges that need to be faced concerns the negative aspect of 'modernization', which poses a threat to our culture: our spiritual values. For example, the rising tide of materialism, a mad race for the acquisition of materials things in life, which promises an interesting, entertaining and comfortable life also, leads to lack of public accountability. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in detail, the challenge 'modernization' poses to our cultural values. Nevertheless, I would like to

call our attention to the following:

- (i) There is little doubt that each person, explicitly or implicitly, demonstrates value positions about the multiple phenomena in his or her immediate world as well as in the broader society. For most, this is a constant activity, the schools and institutions, as instruments of the culture, offer ideal places in which to observe these expressions of value. Consequently, schools and institutions can help students/trainees understand and develop their own value stances regarding the people, places, events, and ideas which surround them. It is unlikely that any human interaction can be value free. Valuing is a reality of human activity. The schools and institutions, therefore, must develop specific and concrete strategies for helping students/trainees understand and act upon this aspect of being human.
- (ii) The cultural values found essential for maintaining public accountability must be introduced at all levels of the education system. This is in recognition of the importance of the information system in the inculcation of proper cultural values and in the evolution of improper cultural values.
- (iii) Historically, our religious institutions particularly the Monk Body was instrumental in imparting an abstract religious doctrine, for example, the doctrine of Karma, into our culture. These institutions must be utilized to reinforce the

cultural values at all levels of the society.

- (iv) Exemplary leadership in high public office is necessary in order to ensure accountability of highest order at the lower levels. Leaders who are sensitive, responsive and accountable are those who consciously seek to promote the congruence of their actions with the value preference of the community, people or groups they lead and serve.
- (v) Pursuing the goals of 'Gross National Happiness' requires using culture as a mediator in implementing the country's developmental activities. This requires utilization of anthropological principles as tools for discovering the possible creative relationship between culture and development. Such approach advocates a movement away from attempts to answer development through externally imposed solutions, to the use of local cultural institutions, processes and rule as a medium for development.

Conclusion

Clearly, there is a causal relationship between the issues of public accountability and Gross National Happiness. In fact, pursuance of the goals of 'Happiness' contributed to the raising of the standards of public accountability in the country. Under its goals, the people at the grassroots level were empowered to plan, to mobilize and allocate local resource and, in turn, to become clearly accountable for their actions.

The country's development philosophy calls for incorporation of the principles of the doctrine of Karma in the standards for

public accountability. For, the quest for 'Happiness' requires turning our society in the direction of the exploration of inner states of experiences rather than the outer world of fact and material accomplishment. And the struggle for individual achievement, especially for material ends, to give way to the acceptance of communally organized and ordained roles.