

# An analysis of the underlying reasons for the transformation of Bhutan's political party system and party power

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**Abstract:** *There are underlying reasons behind the evolution of Bhutan's party system and the transformation of its party power. In Bhutan, there are three specific main factors, namely, the king of Bhutan, the Indian factor, the left-wing party thought and social factors. Excavating the underlying reasons for such evolution and transformation is conducive to our deep understanding of Bhutan's party politics, and is of great significance to the long-term development of Bhutan's future party politics.*

**Keywords:** *Bhutan political parties, the transformation of political party system, changes in party power, reason analysis*

In Bhutan, the king of Bhutan plays a very important role in the evolution of Bhutan's party politics. It is due to the king's long-term vision, broad-minded mindset, and his willingness to give up absolute power that he promotes the formation and development of Bhutan's democratic politics and the two-party system. In this regard, the king of Bhutan is the direct driving force for the formation of Bhutan's two-party system; for a long time, Bhutan has been "guided" by India in terms of political development and foreign policy. India has a great impact on the development of Bhutan. In particular, India's interference in the 2013 general election had a great impact on the development of Bhutan's political parties and Bhutan's development path. Therefore, the Indian factor is the key factor affecting Bhutan's general election and the change of party strength. Among Bhutan's political parties, the left-wing party has the largest force and the largest number, and its ideological trend of the left-wing party has a significant influence on Bhutan. As for Bhutan's right-wing party and the middle party, the former is only the peace and prosperity party while the latter, whose impact on the development of Bhutan's party politics is limited, not only has a small number of members, but also exists for a short period of time. Therefore, the third part of the article mainly analyzes the influence of the left-wing party's ideological trend on its party system change and party force from the perspective of the left-wing party and its ideological trend. Of course, the ideological trend of left-wing parties pays more attention to social development and the well-being of the people, and emphasizes social factors. Therefore, the ideological trend of left-wing parties and social factors are also important reasons for the general election and the change of Party force in Bhutan. Based on this, its profound influence on the evolution of Bhutan's political party system as well as the change of party power will be elaborated in three aspects: the king of Bhutan, Indian factors, left-wing political party thoughts and social factors, so as to further deepen our understanding of the evolution of Bhutan's political parties and party structure.

## 1. The king of Bhutan is the direct driving force for the formation of Bhutan's two-party system

The evolution of Bhutan's political party system, like Bhutan's political democracy, is based on the king's initiative to give up his kingship, and thus the king is the direct driving force to promote the evolution of Bhutan's political party system and to establish a two-party system.

### 1.1 The role of the king in Bhutan

The role of the king of Bhutan is broader and more specific than that of the head of state of the European constitutional monarchy, but much stronger than that of any traditional constitutional monarchy, emirate and Sultanate [1]. Under the condition of continuing the monarchy, the king plays the role as an 'autocrat'. On the one hand, the king must mediate daily political disputes to ensure the non-partisan nature of the national monarchy; on the other hand, the king needs to ensure that politicians build consensus and resolve contradictions and differences within the framework of the law [2]. Therefore,

when participating in the election, the center-left political party expresses its commitment to the king and maintaining his power. In turn, any political party that wins the election will be supported by the king. The king also has the formal power of veto in the political decision-making process, especially when nominating the most leadership positions in the three branches of the political system. And the formulation, implementation and supervision of relevant policies of the political party will still be under the control of the monarch. In addition, Bhutan's social, political, cultural and royal heritages also create a huge informal influence mechanism for the king. Some scholars even believe that the organization and development of the kingdom is aimed at serving the king and realizing the king's wishes [3], or that Bhutan's democracy is under the control of the monarch.

### ***1.2 The king of Bhutan is the main promoter of democratic reform, the evolution of the political party system and the development of party politics***

The king of Bhutan is undoubtedly the main promoter of Bhutan's political development and the growing maturity of party politics. The fourth King Jigme Singh Wangchuck, who came to power in 1972, emphasized that Bhutan's benevolent government should be founded through the participation of the whole people rather than autocratic regime, thus accelerating the development process of the Kingdom's political modernization.

In the 21st century, the king of Bhutan, with a long-term vision and initiative to give up his kingship for the sake of the long-term development of the Kingdom and the long-term happiness of the people, had a very far-reaching impact on the political development path of the kingdom of Bhutan and the development and evolution of the political party system. This also greatly promoted the democratic political process of Bhutan. In September 2001, the old king Wangchuk ordered to prepare for the drafting of Bhutan's constitution, made structural amendments to the law, and officially abolished his absolute power as a monarch, paving the way for the development of democratic elections, party politics and the Constitution in Bhutan. In 2005, with the king's announcement about his abdication, Bhutan changed from the old system to a constitutional monarchy and Bhutan's political parties implemented a two-party system under the constitutional monarchy. In 2006, the king of Bhutan provided for the lifting of the ban on political parties, thereby allowing them to participate in political elections, except for those based on race or religion. After the election of the first national assembly of Bhutan in 2008 and the establishment of a new government, the king was the head of state, and the power of the king was similar to the role of the president in the parliamentary system[4].

### ***1.3 The foresight of the king of Bhutan has a far-reaching impact on the future development of Bhutan***

Unlike western countries, which have experienced industrialization and modernization, and achieved democratic transformation after giving birth to civil society, the economic development of the kingdom of Bhutan lags behind most developing countries in the world. Its modernization process is slow, party politics is late, and the political party system is not perfect. The kingdom of Bhutan has achieved the transformation of its own democratic regime without establishing a mature and perfect industrial system, promoting the development of party politics; it is also different from the history of some Asian and Latin American countries in which the authority system and democratic system swayed left and right in the process of democratic political transformation. In the process of democratic transformation, the fighting and power seizing between soldiers and civil servants did not arise, nor political instability and social order chaos caused by "acclimatization". On the contrary, it has become the youngest democratic country relatively smoothly. In fact, in Bhutan, a sparsely populated country, the political status of the king is higher than that of the party, and most people have a higher sense of identity with the king than the Bhutan party. The king of Bhutan would rather voluntarily transfer the absolute power of the monarch, promote democratic politics in Bhutan, further promote the development of Bhutan's political party system, and persuade the people to accept Bhutan's democracy when designing the democratic system, all of which are an extremely rare case in the history of national development. The king of Bhutan has foresight in politics-in a world where the tide of globalization is irresistible, Bhutan cannot follow the path of isolationism, and Bhutan's autocratic monarchy will sooner or later face the challenge of democracy. In view of this, the king of Bhutan chose to adopt top-down democratic reform to avoid the risks that are not conducive to the survival of the Bhutan Dynasty, national stability, and the political development of political parties, thus having a profound impact on the political development and political party system of Bhutan.

## **2. Indian factor is the key factor affecting Bhutan's general election and the change of party power**

India has always been an important external factor in the development of Bhutan's party politics and the evolution of the party system. In 2007, India assisted the kingdom in conducting the 2007 mock elections by providing electronic voting machines and sending observers. In terms of diplomatic relations, the declaration of both left-wing and the right-wing party emphasizes the need to strengthen relations with India, but on the whole, the left-wing party is more pro-India in politics and national security, and advocates reducing India's control over Bhutan's economy in terms of economic development, while the right-wing party emphasizes reducing dependence on India and taking an independent development path.

### ***2.1 India's influence in Bhutan's political party elections***

In the first general election of Bhutan in 2008, the election between the peace and prosperity Party and the People's Democratic Party went smoothly. Finally, the former successfully became the ruling party. In the second general election in 2013, the people's Democratic Party defeated the former ruling party and came to power smoothly, thus promoting the change of political party power in Bhutan. However, the key factor contributing to this change in party power was India.

Before the 2013 general election in Bhutan, based on the long-term development of Bhutan, the peace and prosperity Party chose a diplomatic policy of friendship with China to promote the relationship between Bhutan and China. In 2012, the leader of the peace and prosperity party, Jigme tinri, met secretly with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in Brazil. However, India expressed dissatisfaction with the peace and prosperity Party's practice of making friends with China, because India did not want Bhutan to befriend China, and was worried that Bhutan's foreign policy would affect India's development strategy and practical interests. India itself has experienced long-term historical development, and many political elections have also made India have rich election experience and know how to control the overall situation. India first estimated the situation of both parties at that time, and also knew that the two competing parties would take measures to win the general election, and even change their long-term planning. Moreover, India estimated the mood of Bhutan voters, who were believed to be swayed by affecting the livelihood issues that people are most concerned about. In this case, on the eve of the 2013 general election, India took measures to embarrass the ruling party by interrupting its long-term supply of kerosene and gas to Bhutan[5]. For a long time, the daily use of liquefied petroleum gas in Bhutan mainly comes from India. Based on this, India deliberately interrupted the supply before the 2013 general election, which led to the soaring domestic fuel prices in Bhutan, increased great pressure on the people and also caused people's dissatisfaction.

As an opposition party, the people's democratic party seized the opportunity to declare to the people that once India lost its ally, the consequence would be the collapse of Bhutan's economy[5]. In this way, the pro-India people's Democratic Party won India's favor. At the same time, Celin toje, chairman of the people's Democratic Party, also condemned the meeting between Jigme Tingri, chairman of the peace and prosperity party, and Premier Wen Jiabao, saying that in the first 100 days of the establishment of the government, the top priority is to rebuild and strengthen the friendly relations between India and Bhutan[6], because for the sake of the long-term development of Bhutan and the interests of its people, the government needs India's help in order to strengthen democracy in Bhutan: That is, India needs to offer plenty of funds to implement the economic stimulus plan to promote the sustainable development of Bhutan. Although the people's Democratic Party won the subsequent general election in 2013, India's behavior was regarded by many Bhutanese as "direct interference in the internal affairs of neighboring countries"[5].

Therefore, due to India's influence in Bhutan's second general election, the peace and prosperity party did not win the support of voters in the 2013 general election, and was finally defeated by the people's Democratic Party, which was close to India. In this way, India's estimation of Bhutan's election parties and Bhutan's voters were accurate, and India's measures have also achieved their expected outcomes. From this incident, we can see that Indian factors have a significant impact on the changes in the power of Bhutan's parties and the pattern of political parties, i.e., India, to a large extent, "guides" the development of Bhutan in all aspects, especially the interference in Bhutan's political party elections and foreign policy, which has brought great influence and challenges to Bhutan's own development.

### ***2.2 India's influence on Bhutan and its political parties in the confrontation between China and India***

In recent years, with regard to India's significant influence and influence on Bhutan and its political

parties, the most typical is the confrontation between China and India. In June 2017, relevant Indian personnel crossed the border without authorization and intruded into our territory, thereby preventing our side from building roads and other normal activities in the Sino African border area-Donglang area. India claimed that the Donglang region belonged to Bhutan. In order to protect Bhutan's territory, it claimed that it was very close to India and also wanted to protect India's security. The purpose of Indian excuses was to prevent China from making friends with Bhutan, avoid China from helping Bhutan get rid of its "guidance" and safeguard Indian interests. In response to this, which seriously endangered China's sovereignty and security, we quickly expressed our determination to safeguard national sovereignty, and finally India withdrew all of it. Bhutan and its political parties were very low-key during the tonlong confrontation. On the one hand, they cautiously agreed with India, and on the other hand, they were unwilling to criticize China too much[5]. In the declaration of the 2018 general election, the chairman of the people's Democratic Party, Celine toje, stressed that "foreign policy should give priority to strengthening the tested friendship with India[7]." At the same time, it also described India as "Bhutan's closest neighbor and friend[8]". In addition, the only issue he talked about was the Sino Bhutan border issue. "We must be sensitive to the geopolitical reality of the region. First of all, we need to solve the border issue between Bhutan and China [9]. " The right-wing political parties attacked the pro India position of the people's Democratic Party. After the disastrous defeat of the people's Democratic Party, relevant analysts said, "the kingdom of Bhutan does not want to be regarded as pro-India or pro-China [10]." Even so, the United Party, which came to power in the 2018 general election, still advocated strengthening India Bhutan relations. Lotte Zelin, chairman of the party, stressed his hope to push the friendship between India and Bhutan to a higher level when explaining foreign policy[11].

### ***2.3 India's influence on Bhutan's party policy***

On the other hand, due to the influence of the relationship between China and India and the domestic realistic pressure, in the 2018 general election, the left-wing political parties and the right-wing political parties did not mention sensitive foreign policy and international policy issues. In fact, Bhutanese political parties were not only expecting India's financial assistance to Bhutan, but also were concerned about their own high foreign debt problem. In addition, although the cooperation with India on hydropower projects is one of the main sources of revenue for the government of Bhutan, these projects alone cannot create employment opportunities for Bhutanese youth, who account for the highest proportion of the total population in South Asia. Moreover, in the long run, hydropower cooperation alone is not enough to offset the expanding trade deficit and debt pressure between Bhutan and India, which is also the main weakness of development. In order to reduce its dependence on India, the United Party, which came to power in the 2018 general election, advocates three basic policies: first, achieving economic diversification to reduce India's monopoly on hydropower, without weakening its economic ties with India; secondly, reducing the foreign debt of at least \$2.5 billion. Unless it reduces the foreign debt guaranteed in India, Bhutan will still be unable to get rid of India's control over its national economic lifeline in the future; third, attracting other sources of foreign investment other than India.

In contrast, the peace and prosperity party won a sweeping victory in the 2008 general election and strengthened China Africa relations. PEMA gyamtsho, the second chairman of the peace and prosperity party, campaigned on the platform of "achieving national self-reliance and self-sufficiency in Bhutan by 2015." He represented those who hoped to get rid of dependence as soon as possible, especially India[5]. The Peace and Prosperity Party promised to adopt the most "diversified" foreign policy and development strategy (euphemism, reduce Bhutan's dependence on India) in Bhutan's 2013 general election. Although it emphasized strengthening the relationship between Bhutan and India in its declaration on the 2018 general election, the peace and prosperity party believed that the relationship between Bhutan and India should "always remain above and outside the party's politics[12]". It can be seen that under the influence of geopolitics and related historical factors, Bhutan's political parties consider strengthening their relations with India as a priority. In fact, any legal political party in Bhutan can't get rid of India's tangible and intangible influence on the survival and development of its political parties during the political election and ruling period, i.e., India affects the development of Bhutan's political party system to a great extent. At the same time, the right-wing parties are also forced to swing to India. In general, India will not easily reduce its influence on Bhutan's party policy and party system. However, Lalit Mansingh, former Foreign Minister of Bhutan, said that the growing maturity and perfection of Bhutan's domestic democratic system is a positive sign. "Although Bhutan has a traditional friendship with India, Bhutan will sooner or later formulate its own line of international affairs in the future[13].

## ***2.4 Indian anti-government armed groups and extreme left-wing political parties in Bhutan have formed a trend of merging***

The extreme left-wing forces are supported by the Communist Party of India (Maoist) and anti-government organizations, and India's extreme left-wing organizations also plan to expand their activities to Bhutan. In 2007, the Communist Party of India (Maoist) believed that 40% of Bhutan's people were Nepalese, which would help it expand its scope of activities and strengthen the political party foundation, so it planned to further expand its activities to Bhutan[14]. This meant that the influence of the united front of Bhutanese extreme leftists in exile in India was further maximized. In response, both India and Bhutan strengthened their border patrols, especially in Assam, where rebel groups were the most active. On the position of Bhutan's extreme left-wing party, India urged Bhutan to take military action against it immediately, but in view of Bhutan's own military resources, it adopted a more moderate attitude towards it. In 1997, Bhutan began to establish military outposts on the southern border of India. India also proposed to take collective actions against the relevant "rebels", but Bhutan was unwilling to allow India to enter the border, worrying that if Bhutan and India joined forces, the "rebels" would take measures and might retaliate against Bhutanese civilians. In 2003, the two sides carried out a joint operation called "operation all clear", which attacked the extreme left-wing organizations in Bhutan. Moreover, the Indian army chief of staff, general N.C. Vij, also claimed that 650 "rebels" were killed or captured in this operation[15].

In short, the Indian factor of Bhutan's political parties in political election and policy implementation cannot be ignored, while the Chinese factor is very small. Except for the people's Democratic Party's announcement that it will "continue border negotiations with China", the declarations of other parties remain silent on the Chinese factor. As a buffer country between China and India, Bhutan is facing great pressure of survival. Bhutan's political parties are also treading on thin ice in dealing with the Sino-India relationship and related international affairs, and there is a contradictory mentality. The unpleasant history of India's aggression and annexation of its neighboring countries is haunting Bhutan. Moreover, India controls Bhutan's internal and foreign affairs to a large extent, so the role of Indian factors cannot be ignored in all aspects of Bhutan's domestic development. On the other hand, Bhutan also wants to adhere to independent development, have friendly exchanges with China, and prevent India from "Sikkim" it. India's unwarranted interference in the 2013 general election caused a wave of opposition from the Bhutanese people, condemning India's interference in Bhutan's internal affairs. As the Bhutanese people said, "we like India, but we don't like Indians; we don't like China, but we like Chinese people[16]." Bhutan's left-wing political parties and right-wing political parties also share such attitude and views.

Based on the statements above, India, to a large degree, "guides" Bhutan's political development, party elections and foreign policy, i.e., the Indian factor is plays a key role in the development of Bhutan's political parties. In particular, India's influence in Bhutan's party elections before the 2013 general election shows that India, based on its own development strategy and interests, has greatly affected the changes in Bhutan's party force and the development of Bhutan's party politics. This can elaborately indicates that although Bhutan has achieved a certain degree of independence through efforts, it is still facing severe external challenges.

From monarchy to democracy, Bhutan's political modernization has gone through a distinctive development path. At present, this development path has led Bhutan to a new node, with new problems caused by political elections inside and a new pattern formed by geopolitics outside. How to proceed successfully is a test of whether the kingdom of Bhutan can skillfully integrate the elements of the mainstream modernization model and the traditional elements of Bhutan's national conditions as before, so as to solve complex problems[17].

## **3. The ideological trend of left-wing parties and social factors are also important reasons for the general election and the change of Party force in Bhutan**

### ***3.1 The characteristics of the ideological trend of left-wing parties in Bhutan***

Although the ideological trend of left-wing parties in Bhutan shows the characteristics of social democracy, the legal political parties in Bhutan all declare that they take the concept of national happiness governance as the guiding ideology. Among them, the legal center-left Party represented by the United Party is a socialist party with "peach blossom" as the election symbol, but denies that it is a socialist party[18]. According to the law, political parties can only be divided according to ruling ideas, rather than

ideology. No legally registered political party in Bhutan can be divorced from the concept of "gross national happiness"[19]. In general, the left-wing political party trend of thought emphasizes equal rights, and emphasizes that the government should initially retain control over key departments, safeguard public interests, promote egalitarianism, establish a society without class differences, and eradicate poverty. It believes that we should take into account the freedom, justice, equality and basic protection of citizens, narrow the gap between the rich and the poor, and establish a socialist secular federal democratic country[20]. The ideological trend of left-wing parties also affects their policy practice, and left-wing parties advocate that the government should reduce influence. Sustainable development and democracy are achieved through decentralization and shared responsibility. The government should not intervene more, but should promote social governance[21].

### ***3.2 The influence of left-wing party thought on the party system and structure in Bhutan***

The ideological trend of Bhutan's left-wing political parties has had an important impact on the evolution of Bhutan's political party system and the pattern of political parties. From the perspective of power comparison, the left-wing parties are stronger than the right-wing counterparts in terms of the number of political parties and influence. There are four legally registered political parties, three of which are center-left parties and one is center-right party (the Peace and Prosperity Party). Until 2018, the number of members of left-wing parties was 22909, while that of right-wing counterparts reached 4790, 18119 fewer than the former. In terms of party influence, after the right-wing party peace and prosperity party won the general election in 2008, its influence showed a downward trend, and the "socialist" Party became the winner. In the previous two general elections, the right-wing party peace and prosperity party and the left-wing party people's Democratic Party took turns in power, serving as the ruling party and the opposition party respectively[19]. In the 2013 general election, the peace and prosperity party was accused of too much "seeking international attention" and shining brightly on the "dialogue on gross national happiness"[22], but it lost contact with the people and was eventually eliminated. In the 2018 general election, although the people's Democratic Party was out, the left-wing party United Party, with the belief of democratic socialism, became the current ruling party, which is also a victory for the left-wing party to a certain extent. At present, the left-wing parties occupy far more seats in Parliament than the right-wing parties. So naturally, the left-wing political parties and their ideological trends are more influential, with a bigger impact on party politics and party structure.

In the 2013 and 2018 general elections, the people's Democratic Party and the United Party came to the power respectively, while the peace and prosperity party existed as an opposition party. This pattern once again contributed to the change in the strength of Bhutan's political parties. However, the main factors behind this transformation are Bhutan's left-wing party thought and social factors.

### ***3.3 Take the left-wing United Party of Bhutan as an example***

The guiding ideology of the Unity Party-a left-wing political party in Bhutan, emphasizes freedom and equality of the people, social harmony and cohesion, and national democracy and unity. It also takes social democracy as its ideology, protects the legitimate rights of the people, and advocates narrowing the gap between the rich and the poor. On the eve of the 2018 general election, the party attracted the lowest social class and became the party with the largest number of members and the greatest influence before the election. Moreover, before the election, the leader of the United Party also went deep into the grass-roots and visited 205 nests (villages) [23], all of which were of great help to the election of the United Party. In the 2018 general election, the right-wing party Peace and Prosperity Party and the left-wing party Unity Party put forward proposals one after another: the Peace and Prosperity Party focuses on the stability and unity of the Kingdom, while the unity party pays more attention to social factors. Issues related to culture and education, health care, economic income and so on attract public attention. In his speech, CE Lin promised to respect and protect the customs and cultures of all ethnic groups, and strengthen infrastructure construction, This has narrowed the distance between the United Party and the people, especially its Nepalese people, and won its support. Finally, in the 2018 general election, the United Party came to power and has been in power since then.

The main reason behind the smooth ruling of the left-wing United Party in the 2018 general election is that it can win the hearts of the people and firmly grasp social factors. First, the political achievements of the previous two ruling parties are not outstanding, and the social benefits are not obvious. After the people's Democratic Party won the general election in 2013, despite great efforts to promote social development, social benefits were not significant: agriculture still played a leading role, the unemployment rate of Bhutan's young people was rising, and the foreign debt increased. According to

the 2018 labor force survey report, the unemployment rate of youth increased from 12.7% in 2017 to 15.7%. The unemployment rate of urban youth in Bhutan is relatively high, at 6.8%, while that of rural youth is 2.7% [24]. Therefore, during the ruling period of the people's Democratic Party, its political achievements did not conform to the wishes and aspirations of the people, and its social benefits were not significant. Then, in the 2018 general election, the people's Democratic Party was eliminated. Second, under the influence of the Dong Lang incident, the people's Democratic Party has long been inclined to India, which actually reduces Bhutan's autonomy and independence and causes people's complaints. Therefore, the long-term Pro India people's Democratic Party has not won the hearts of the people. Last but not least, the United Party really pays attention to social needs and the interests of the masses, acts in accordance with the ideas of the left-wing party, and its emphasis on social equality, people's health, industrial development and other propositions attract the attention of voters. At the same time, the candidates of the United Party are also deeply loved by the people. They have strong professional ability and are really close to the people. Lotte Zelin often lead his team to go deep into the society, visit the lowest class, care about the sufferings of the people, and win respect from the people. These three factors that promote the Unity Party to come to power and the change of Party strength are essentially the embodiment of the ideological trend of left-wing parties, which pay attention to society and emphasize social factors to a great extent.

After coming into power, the United Party still pays attention to social factors, and the government formed by it pays more attention to people's livelihood and equality. Leader Zelin said that he would issue the "vision 2045" plan to promote the development of Bhutan society. In addition to developing water conservancy, he would strengthen investment in agriculture, mining and tourism, promote diversified economic growth, and then benefit the society and people.

Therefore, we can see that the ideological trend of Bhutan's left-wing political parties and social factors are more popular, which to a large extent affects the election of Bhutan's political parties and is the key factor affecting the change of Bhutan's party strength.

#### 4. Conclusion

To sum up, there is a clear correlation between the king of Bhutan, Indian factors, left-wing party thoughts and social factors and the development and evolution of Bhutan's party system and the changes of party power. This correlation is mainly manifested in the important influence of three factors on the changes of Bhutan's party politics and party power. Of course, the evolution of Bhutan's political party system will be affected by many factors in the domestic and foreign environment. In addition to the above three factors, there are other influencing factors, but its role is not obvious. In the long run, we should see the substantial impact of these important factors on Bhutan's future political development and the evolution of the political party system. Their existence and role will make Bhutan's future political development more democratized and socialized, and make the kingdom of Bhutan strengthen its self-regulation, strive to get rid of the influence of other countries, and further promote the independent development of the kingdom of Bhutan. Thus, the process of political modernization of the kingdom of Bhutan will be promoted to a great extent, and its development path will be increasingly widened.

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