# GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF BHUTAN

**Position and area:** Bhutan comprises a land area of 38,394 square kilometers. The land lies between latitudes 26o45'N and 28o10'N and between longitudes 88o45'E and 92o10'E. The country is relatively compact with a maximum latitudinal distance of 170 kilometers and the maximum longitudinal distance of 300 kilometers. Bhutan is landlocked and is bordered by India in the south and by the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China in the north and northwest. Bhutan's borders are largely natural ones. The border with Tibet is traditional following the watershed of the Chumbi Valley in the northwest and the crest of the Himalayas in the north. The southern border with India was established by treaty with the British in the nineteenth century and basically follows the line made by the Himalayan foothills with the plains.

**Landform:** Bhutan is almost entirely mountainous with flat land limited to the broader river valleys. The land rises from approximately 300 meters above sea level in the south to the towering Himalayan mountains in the north of over 7,000 meters high. The densely populated central valleys are separated from the south by a 2,000meter high chain of mountains. Bhutan has three major landform features; the southern foothills, the inner Himalayas and the higher Himalayas. The southern foothills rise from the plains to heights of 1,500 meters extending to the north by about 20 kilometers. Southern Bhutan consists of a heavy network of steep hills covered with large tracks of dense forests and jungles. Central Bhutan consisting of the inner Himalayas rises gradually to about 3,000 meters. This region contains the broader river valleys of Paro, Thimphu, Punakha, Wangduephodrang and Trashigang, which comprise the economic and cultural heartland of the country. An infinite variety of plants, flowers and trees including apples, peaches and plums grow in the fertile valleys. Rice is the principle crop and large tracts of forests including birch, pine, chestnut and oak cover central Bhutan. The northern region comprises the main Himalayan range of high snow capped mountains which separate Bhutan from Tibet. The Kulagangri and the Gangkar Punsum (both over 7,500 meters) and the Jomolhari (7,316 meters) are the highest peaks in the Bhutan Himalaya. The slopes of the mountains are covered with birch, magnolia and rhododendrons while for many months of the year the summits are decked with snow. Population in this zone is sparse.

**Rivers:** All but two of Bhutan's rivers rise in the higher Himalayas and journey south to join the Brahmaputra in India. Almost all the valleys have swift flowing rivers or streams, which merge ultimately into four major river systems as they flow south viz. the Ammochu, the Wangchhu, the Sankosh and the Manas. The flows of the rivers are fed by the perennial

snows or the summer monsoons and are highest in the monsoon season (June to September) and lowest in winter (December to March).

**Climate:** The country can be divided into three distinct climatic zones corresponding broadly to the three main geographical divisions. The southern belt has a hot humid climate with temperatures remaining fairly even throughout the year between 15 and 30 degree Celsius with rainfall ranging between 2,500 to 5,000 millimeters in some areas. The central inner Himalayas has a cool temperate climate with annual rainfall averaging about 1,000 millimeters with western region receiving comparatively higher rainfall. The higher and more northern region has a severe alpine climate with annual rainfall around 400 mm. Much of the rainfall is concentrated in the summer months with the southwest monsoon accounting for 60 to 90 percent of the total rainfall. There is substantial variation within these broad ranges and the climate and rainfall characteristics change dramatically from one valley to an adjacent on with consequent sharp changes in the composition of agricultural production. Wide spread flood rainfall may occur during summer monsoon and the waters of the valleys may swell dramatically, spreading across the plains and flooding fields, bridges and houses.

**Government:** On 17 December 1907, Ugyen Wangchuck was crowned the first hereditary monarch of Bhutan by the civil and monastic representatives. It was as a result of the influence of the strength and the farsightedness of Ugyen Wangchuck that for the first time Bhutan was united under a central authority, which provided the country with stability and opportunity for development. In 1926 his son Jigme Wangchuck, who ruled until his death in 1952, succeeded Ugyen Wangchuck. The third Druk Gyalpo, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck began a campaign of modernization and expansion of Bhutan's government and society based on the accomplishments of his two predecessors in uniting the country under a strong central authority. Hence, the National Assembly consisting of representatives of the people, the Monastic order and civil administration was reestablished in 1953. The present Druk Gyalpo, His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck acceded to the throne in 1972. His Majesty the king is the head of state. The head of government is nominated from among the Cabinet Ministers. There has been steady decentralization of decision-making and institute building since His Majesty the King was enthroned. The most momentous change in the structure of the government came in 1998 after the devolution of the executive power by His Majesty the King to the Council of Ministers. The change set off a process of adaptation in the relationship between the various branches of the government, as shown in **chart 1** it reflects the logical delineation in the separation of powers along with the establishment of elected Council of Ministers with full executive powers. It shows the apparatus of all the important aspects of the Bhutanese system of governance like the executive, legislative and judiciary going down from the central to the district levels.

Under the unity and farsighted leadership provided by His Majesty the King, the nation will be governed primarily through the Cabinet. The Cabinet Ministers are the heads of ministries, who will oversee that policies are formulated and programmes are carried out. The autonomous bodies have interactions primarily with the ministers, and this is denoted as such in the organogram.

**The National Assembly**: The Tshogdu (The National Assembly) consists of 150 members; 105 are the elected representatives of the people, 10 are from the Dratshang (Clergy) and 35 are nominated representatives of the Government. The National Assembly as the legislative body, is an independent institute, which elect Cabinet Ministers, approve annual budget and legislate acts governing the country, and discuss national issues. The people's representatives are directly elected by the people of their respective constituencies through secret ballot. The representatives of the clergy are elected by the Zhung Dratshang (Central Monastic Body) and the concerned Rabdeys (District Monastic Bodies). The representatives of the government are nominated by the King from among senior civil servants. All the members serve for a term of three years. The Speaker and the Deputy Speaker are elected by the National Assembly from among its members. The National Assembly meets twice a year. The assembly enacts legislation and advises the government on all matters of national importance. Decisions are passed by a simple majority. A secret ballot is taken on all matters of national importance. Any Bhutanese over 25 years of age can be a candidate for membership.

**The Royal Advisory Council:** The Lodey Tshogdey (The Royal Advisory Council) was formally established in 1965 to advise the King and government ministers and to supervise the implementation of programs and policies laid down by the National Assembly. The Royal Advisory Council will continue to be consultative and advisory body. The Royal Advisory Council, as stipulated in its chatrim, will ensure the observance of the decisions made during the National Assembly and the Cabinet meetings. Therefore, it will have links with both the Cabinet and the National Assembly. It consists of nine members. There are six representatives of the public (Meeser Thuepoens) who serve for a term of three years. They are elected by the National Assembly through secret ballot from among the representatives of the Dzongkhags. Each Dzongkhag (district) deputes one representative who is elected through secret ballot from among the public. Two members represent the Monastic Body, one each from the Central Monastic Body and the Rabdeys who serve a term of one year. The chairman (Zhung Kaloen) is nominated by the king.

**The Monastic Body:** The Monastic Body is comprised of the Central Monastic Body and the Rabdeys (District Monastic Bodies). The current strength of the Monastic Body is about 5,000 registered gelongs (monks) and is financed by an annual subsidy from the Royal Government. Punakha and Thimphu Dratshang having strength of 1,600 constitute the Central Monastic Body. The Monastic Body is the sole arbiter on religious matters. The Je Khempo who is chosen from among high-ranking gelongs is the head of the Body. He is assisted by four high ranking Lopens of the Central Monastic Body.

**Local Government:** Local administration has been strengthened to meet the requirement of decentralized administration and development. There are twenty dzongkhags or districts each under the charge of a dzongkhag administrator or dzongda responsible for civil administration and development activities. Each dzongda is assisted by a dzongrab who is responsible for planning and development and civil administration. The larger dzongkhags are sub divided into dungkhags headed by a dungpa. A Group of villages, from a gewog, the lowest administrative unit each gewog has a headman called the gup (in the north) or mandal (in the south). In each dzongkhag the dzongda is assisted in his development function by the Dzongkhag Yargye Tshogchung (District Development Committee) which consists of people’s representatives and government officials.

**The Judiciary:** Bhutan's Legal Code is based on that laid down by Ngawang Namgyal, the first Shabdrung who arrived Bhutan in 1616. Traditional Buddhist precepts are significantly maintained in the legal processes. The High Court consists of eight judges. There is a court in each dzongkhag headed by a Thrimpoen and assisted by Ramjams but minor disputes are settled by village gups. As the final arbiter of law, the judiciary has been independent from other branches of the government since its inception.