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In a surprise move, the King of Bhutan handed over responsibilities as the Monarch and Head of State of Bhutan to Crown Prince Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuk as the fifth Druk Gyalpo.

In a Kasho issued on December 9 (and formally announced on December 14), the King has said that the time has come for him to hand over responsibilities to his son and that he is confident that a bright future lies ahead with the leadership of a new King and a democratic government that is best suited for his country. He also expressed his gratitude to the Clergy, the officials of the government, the members of the business community, the security forces and to all the people of the twenty Dzongkhags for “unfailing support and loyalty to him and the country.”

On the national day that followed on 17 December, the new King and the fifth Gyalpo made a moving speech and in all humility praised his father for the latter’s great achievements including a legacy of a sound democratic constitutional monarchy. While reminding the citizens that they will have to work harder in a “land locked country with a small population,” he outlined four major responsibilities - 1. Peace and tranquility of the nation 2. The sovereignty and security of the country 3. The fulfilling of the vision of Gross National Happiness and 4. Strengthening of the new system of democracy.

In one of our earlier updates we had said that “there is no end to surprises” from the King. The King has again sprung a surprise on the Bhutanese and the Bhutan watchers by abruptly deciding to abdicate and hand over the responsibilities to his son.

One of the members of a delegation that recently visited Bhutan asked him what he would do when he has retired at a very young age. The King jocularly responded that he would now take care of his family! But it is certain that he would focus on some of his pet projects like protection of environment, ecological balance besides the concept of “national happiness.” The latter concept began by him is catching up and in a recent issue of the Economist- the concept of national happiness was the main article. He would also have time to steer Bhutan into a genuine constitutional democracy in due course. His position would be very much like that of Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore who handed over power to younger leaders and still found time to be available for guidance in the governance of the country.

As for the reaction of the public, a response from a low paid skilled worker reflects succinctly the position. He said “I have carried a sense of loss since the fourth Gyalpo announced his abdication in our Dzonkhag last year . . . I feel somehow (now) that the only difference is the name of our King. Everything else is the same.” Yes it looks that everything will be the same.

The Refugee issue is getting murkier:

With the offer of USA, Canada and other well meaning countries to take the bulk of the refugees for settlement abroad, it was thought that the poor refugees now nearly 106,000 and languishing in the camps for the last sixteen years would finally see the light at the end of the tunnel. But surprisingly both Nepal and Bhutan are taking a very rigid stand. Even the high level meeting between the two governments on the refugees has not taken place. The meeting had been postponed twice and it looks that it may not take place at all as both the governments have driven themselves to a corner!

First Bhutan: In the 86th session of National Assembly, the Prime Minister who is also in charge of Foreign Affairs, Lyonpo Khandu Wangchuk declared that it will not be practical for the government to talk to the people in the refugee camps because most of them were not Bhutanese. This is evidently in response to the present Nepal Government’s view that the refugee issue is one between Bhutan government and the refugees and that Nepal has nothing to do with it. But the reaction of the Bhutanese Prime minister is surprising. Instead of rejecting the view on principle, he has questioned the very basis of the negotiation. Counting in Kudenabari has shown that the bulk of the refugees were genuine Bhutanese citizens before they were driven out. (Here we do take into account the second category of refugees also who were supposed to have left Bhutan voluntarily!)

In the same session, the Prime Minister of Bhutan virtually ruled out taking any of the refugees back. He said that the government would not take back the refugees as they are “highly politicised camp people” and taking them would mean “importing ready-made terrorism and instability in Bhutan.” Thus he has shut the door for any negotiation or further verification.

Now Nepal: Except for a brief period in the year 2000, when G.P.Koirala was the Prime Minister, the Nepal Government had never taken any interest in the refugees. The UNHCR was feeding the refugees and the camps were far away from the capital. The refugees themselves

were a very quiet and innocent lot who gave no problem to the authorities. They were very religious and there were plenty of educational and cultural activities to keep them busy. But with increasing frustration and the advent of the Maoists, the youngsters were obviously getting politicised and radicalised.

Nepal cannot therefore shirk its responsibility now by saying that it only gave shelter to the refugees out of humanitarian consideration and that the refugee problem could be addressed only if they are allowed to return home in a dignified manner. He has not clarified what the term “dignified manner” means, as if settlement in third country in USA, Canada, Australia and Europe is not a dignified one.

This position of Nepal was further confirmed when G.P.Koirala, the Prime Minister revealed in his meeting with refugee leaders that he had asked the US government to help the exiled Bhutanese to return to Bhutan at least for a day before taking them to USA! He wanted the US to respect the “right to return.”

By making these conditions Nepal is ensuring that the refugees continue in the camps indefinitely. This is a sad development.

Sensing that the issue is getting intractable with no prospects of a solution, on 30 December 2006, the Bhutanese refugees have submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister of Nepal, urging him to take steps to resolve the refugee crisis as soon as possible to prevent the situation from worsening into a state of permanent displacement.

It looks that Tek Nath Rijal, a leader whom I respect, is responsible for the hardening of Nepal’s position on the question of the refugees. In one of my discussions with Mr. Rijal, the latter promised that he will not stand in the way of those who are willing for third country settlement and local assimilation. **We hope that he will stand by his promise and allow those who want to go for a brighter future instead of languishing in the camps indefinitely.**

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