Silence in the Land of the Thunder Dragon
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Summary

In Bhutan, old codes of secrecy are part of the political culture. This creates societal silences around politically sensitive issues such as ethnicity, citizenship and the domestic conflict of the past. This article-based thesis raises the overall question: what forms of societal silence exist in Bhutan and what consequences do they have for the political culture of the country?

Four articles answer this overall question. The article ‘Freedom of Speech and Silent Youth Protest in Bhutan: ‘Plz Delete it from Your Inbox’ contributes to our understanding of silence as sensitivity and how obliviousness, self-censorship and silent protests play out in the political culture of Bhutan. The article ‘Silent Diplomacy and Requests for Information: What the Doklam Conflict Revealed about Government, Media and Citizens in Bhutan’ discusses silent diplomacy, the Bhutanese media’s role in silence and the online opposition against silence from Bhutanese citizens. The article ‘Driglam Namzha and Silenced Ethnicity in Bhutan’s Monarchical Democracy’ contributes with a look at how the aim of social cohesion silences ethnicity and how uniformity is silently accepted in the current political culture of Bhutan. Finally, the article ‘Piecing Together Past and Present in Bhutan: Narration, Silence and Forgetting in Conflict’ illustrates how silence exists between diverse narratives of Bhutan’s past creating different understandings of the present.

As a whole, the thesis paints a picture of a political culture marked by limited freedom of speech and societal silence around politically sensitive issues. The government encourages societal silence by employing silent diplomacy. Informants’
fear of how authorities may punish opposition inspires careful navigation around sensitive issues. Despite societal silence in Bhutan, informants have formed a multiplicity of narratives about sensitive issues such as the domestic conflict of the 1990s. These narratives exist as parallel understandings of past and present, creating rifts in society. The thesis suggests that societal silence is increasingly questioned by Bhutanese citizens and that informants are discontent with the pre-democratic hierarchies that exit in the political culture.

This thesis draws on empirical material and inspiration from seven months of anthropological fieldwork among students at a Bhutanese college. The significance of the research undertaken in this thesis is found in the intersection of the field of research and the choice of anthropological methods. The thesis contributes to the limited scholarship on the political culture in Bhutan, and advances our understanding of Bhutan’s democratic development. With its focus on silence, the thesis contributes to our understanding of this as a social phenomenon that plays a role in shaping social and political life.