

A very good afternoon to Your Excellency the Minister in Charge of the Foreign Ministry Lyonpo, Yeshey Zimba, His Excellency the UN Assistant Secretary General, Ajay Chhibber, our esteemed development partners and other dignitaries here today.

First of all I would like to clarify that I am here as the Media Representative not by selection but rather through election whereby media houses voted for me as their representative for the RTM.

My comments will first focus on the contribution of Bhutanese Media to our new democracy, then the the government media relationship and finally the constraints on media houses and how they could be solved both by the government and our development partners.

The Bhutanese Media has established itself as one of the key stakeholder in the evolution of a modern and democratic Bhutan. The Bhutanese media has moved from an age of being a government bulletin in the 1970's to the fiercely independent and diverse media houses of today.

Corruption

The media especially the print media is playing a very decisive role in fighting corruption. To put it in context corruption in Bhutan is lower than other countries in the region but we would like to see it nipped in the bud. A number of investigative stories on various issues like medical procurement, mining, and etc have led to investigations, prosecutions, resignation of senior officials and system improvements. Nobody has been spared no matter how high or powerful. As a result the people are becoming bolder and demanding more accountability. It must also be mentioned that based on media reports this government has also taken positive action on some major corruption issues.

Good Governance and Service Delivery

The Bhutanese media is also focusing on governance issues like rural access, drinking water, sanitation, health, poverty which helps to inform the government on the needs of the people. This combined with stories on administrative lapses, inefficiency or abuse if power is contributing to good governance and better service delivery.

Environment

The media has been also at the forefront of protecting the environment. Stories on illegal mining, illegal timber cutting have lead to prosecutions and system improvements by the government. The Bhutanese media has also been highlighting the effects of global warming on Bhutan in a major way especially for the international audience.

Democratic Culture and Mindset

Democracy is not just elections but it is also a mindset and one of the biggest contributions of the media has been in helping evolve a democratic mindset and democratic culture based on local ground realities. People are now less afraid of authority, more vocal on their rights and less tolerant of any kind of abuse.

Human and Civil Rights

The media is also contributing to better Human and Civil rights for ordinary Bhutanese citizens. For e.g. Stories on prisoners has contributed to better conditions for prisoners and more legal awareness on part of law enforcement officials. Stories on some controversial practices like night hunting are affecting a mindset change. The rights of women and weaker section of the society is also keenly looked at by the media. The media is currently taking up issues of civic rights like freedom to speech, Right to Information and opposing any laws or actions that are even remotely seen as being undemocratic for ordinary citizens.

Relationship between media and government

Like in any healthy democracy the relationship between the government and media is complicated. But what must be said is that this government has gone out of its way to foster media freedom and interact more with the media.

We have a monthly meet the press with the PM and cabinet which is the only kind in the world. No matter how critical our stories are there are no consequences. The government generally has accepted criticism and in my personal experience made no efforts to undermine media freedom. I am a strong government critic but the fact that I am here talking to our most important donor partners says something.

Cabinet ministers especially the Prime Minister are accessible by phone even late in the evening and are media friendly. In fact Lyonpo Zimba is a regular victim with me disturbing his dinners and family evenings for news.

But that does not mean we give the government an easy time and at times people even say that we do more opposing than even the opposition party which I feel is the way it should be.

An area where improvement is needed is certain levels of bureaucracy that have a media or information sharing phobia. In this context the Right to Information would be of great help not only for the media but mainly for ordinary citizens for enhancing good governance and promoting transparency.

Constraints of the Media

However the main challenge for the Bhutanese media mainly has to do with resource and infrastructure constraints. The Bhutanese media depends for about 80 to 90% of their revenue on advertisements of which a major chunk is government advertisement and the pie is shrinking with more media outlets coming up.

We in the media feel there are a few practical solutions which would help build our capacity for which we would appreciate help from our development partners and the government.

An important area is infrastructure support like a printing city, printing industrial area or a common printing press especially for private media houses like for e.g. a press in eastern Bhutan.

Our partners could also consider giving soft developmental loans and access to finance for all kinds of media houses that want to upgrade their capacity.

One area is effective trainings focusing on both basic training for young reporters preferably in country and specialized ones like investigative, climate, financial etc for senior reporters.

Support could also be given in the form of expert consultancy for media houses by donors to improve editorial content, business models, design, administrative structure, management etc. One form of training could also be established international media organizations in your countries accepting our reporters on a short term basis for some work experience and exposure. The news organizations in your countries could link with ours to have long terms relationships so that we can learn from your positive experiences.

One major step is to allow and help Bhutanese media products to access your rich and diverse markets for more consumers.

Assistance would also be welcome to help establish and strengthen common media bodies like Journalists Association, Press Council, Press Club and etc that benefits all media houses.

There could also be a mechanism of cooperation, collaboration and consultation between the Bhutanese media, our government and our development partners to further foster a vibrant and professional media.

We feel that our development partners assisting the growth of the infant Bhutanese media in the future would be greatly appreciated and further the cause of a strong democracy in Bhutan.

End of Speech. (4 minutes and 50 seconds speech).

Panel discussion

After the speech during the panel discussion the media representative urged the donors to reconsider their move to withdraw or slowdown aid to Bhutan.

The Media Rep (MR) highlighted two main Areas of 1. Agriculture where the bulk of our population is involved and 2. Hydropower which is the main revenue earner for Bhutan.

In Agriculture the Media Rep pointed out how the official National Statistical Bureau's calculations (used by donors) on intermediate input (similar to cost of production) in important crops like Maize and Rice were wrong.

Maize is grown by the maximum farmers with 40,000 farmers engaged in it. The NSB's flawed data said that the intermediate input was 8% while in fact detailed research by the Ministry of Agriculture later

showed that the actual intermediate input was 25% indicating a higher cost of production and so lower returns for farmers.

Similarly the official production figures used by the Ministry of Agriculture on crop production were also flawed. The official records of 2008 show that Rice produced per hectare is 4 tons but the actual figure is 2.2 tones. In maize the official figures of 2007 shows 4 tons per hectare but the actual figure is 2 tons per hectare. The actual figures have been verified by the Agriculture Director. (Source: Business Bhutan article on 'Inflated GDP')

The Media Rep said that these faulty data was due to poorly trained enumerators who were mainly school children or drop outs.

2. Hydropower

The Media Rep pointed out that it was mainly due to hydropower projects the per capita income of Bhutan was recorded at 2,154.90 US \$ and Bhutan enjoyed such high economic growth rates. However, the ground realities are quite different.

For 1000 MW project Bhutan has to approximately spend 1 billion US\$ or Nu 47 bn. These figures jack up the growth rate to 19% to 24% for one or two years but in reality 95% of this money leaves the country through foreign contractors, foreign laborers and foreign raw materials. So while GDP captures the higher growth rate it does not capture where this money is actually headed and the huge loans taken. As a result Bhutan is taking Rs 10 billion in loan just to meet the rupee shortage due to the skewed balance of payment status. The per capita income is also faulty as it does not take into account that all our capital works are funded by donors.

So these high growth rates on paper give our development partners the impression that Bhutan is doing so well that we don't need aid.

The Media Rep requested the donors to reconsider the decision to either withdraw aid in the short term or long term based on the above two facts and continue their cooperation with Bhutan.

