

Democracy in the High Himalaya: A Conversation with the Chief Election Commissioner of Bhutan



Bhutan made the transition to constitutional parliamentary democracy only in 2008, yet has already completed four rounds of parliamentary elections — returning three different parties to power, each transfer seamless and peaceful. Delivering that democracy falls to the Election Commission of Bhutan, an institution whose independence is written into the Constitution and which must reach voters across some of the most demanding geography on earth, from passes that close for days to settlements seven walking days from the nearest road. In this written exchange with R K Thukral, editor of the Indian Journal of Electoral Studies, Deki Pema, Chief Election Commissioner of Bhutan, reflects on the ongoing Fourth Local Government Elections and the question of turnout they have raised, the logistics of inclusion, the Commission's measured adoption

of technology, the threats posed by misinformation and AI and two decades of partnership with the Election Commission of India. A single conviction runs through her answers: that credible elections rest not on any one innovation but on institutional independence, sustained civic engagement and the discipline of treating each election as the foundation for improving the next.

Bhutan is currently undertaking its Fourth Local Government Elections, with the first phase of the Dzongkhag Thromde Tshogde Elections conducted in 2026. How would you assess the conduct of these elections in terms of preparedness, voter participation, transparency and public confidence?

Polls for the first phase of the Fourth Local Government Elections, the Dzongkhag Thromde Tshogde Elections in Thimphu and Phuentsholing were held on 15 July 2026 and conducted in a systematic, transparent and peaceful manner.

Preparations followed established procedure: the electoral roll of 10,370 registered voters was finalised through quarterly verification against the government civil registry and issued for public viewing; claims and objections were processed and 57 newly naturalised citizens were enrolled through a supplementary electoral roll. Thirteen polling stations, 33 EVMs and 182 election and security officials were deployed with postal ballot and special early-voting facilities for registered eligible voters. The newly developed Election Result Administration (ERA) System was piloted and worked without any hiccups, though some polling officials needed additional handholding, pointing to the need for targeted training before its full roll-out in the second phase, with a greater number of elective offices and polling stations.

Transparency was maintained through timely public notices at each stage: from nomination scrutiny and postal ballot reminders to the 48-hour no-campaign period, real-time turnout information, same-day provisional results and next

morning formal declaration, keeping voters, candidates and all stakeholders well-informed throughout. This was reinforced by National Observer reports, campaign monitoring, grievance and dispute-settlement mechanisms. An Election Commission of India delegation was present in Thimphu under the International Visitors' Programme.

Voter participation is an area of concern. Turnout in Phuentsholing was 47% and Thimphu 31.26%. Against the pre-pandemic elections in 2016, the picture is mixed: Phuentsholing turnout declined from 62.75% to 47% while Thimphu held from 31.01% to 31.26%. Women continued to show up in greater numbers than men, at 55.83% of all voters. The 2021 figures, 84.54% and 54.48%, were achieved under door-to-door and calibrated polling arrangements introduced specifically for pandemic conditions and are not treated here as a comparable baseline.

To sum up, the Thromde elections met the legal and procedural standard required by the Election Act: Electoral Roll integrity maintained, nominations vetted, campaigns, public debates and common forums conducted as per procedure and polling peaceful and orderly, with no election disputes or petitions in either Thromde. Voter turnout remains a concern the Commission takes into the second phase.

Bhutan's mountainous terrain and dispersed settlements present distinct challenges for election administration. What are the major logistical and operational challenges faced by the Election Commission in ensuring that elections remain accessible, efficient and inclusive across the country?

Bhutan's mountainous terrain, dispersed settlements, localised weather conditions and uneven connectivity pose logistical and operational challenges with the lives and livelihoods inordinately shaped by geography and the rhythm of nature requiring ergonomic design and micro-level planning to deliver election services to the high-altitude communities. The legal provisions governing the term of office and the time period within which elections have to be completed (maximum of 90 days for fresh elections and lesser for bye-elections) leave very little room to accommodate the vagaries of nature.

The national highway network itself bears this out. Winter snow regularly closes key mountain passes of the national highway for days while monsoon flooding and landslides regularly disrupt the network further. This same road network carries EVMs, postal ballots, polling officials, security personnel and voters to constituencies across the country, so a closure timed against nomination, campaign or polling deadlines has direct operational consequences and financial implications.

Lunana Gewog (block) in Gasa Dzongkhag (district), at around 4,000 masl officially seven walking days from the nearest roadhead, is a case in point. Access is limited to a few months a year and many households split up seasonally, some migrating to the warmer dzongkhags of Punakha and Paro in winter while others remain in the villages. The ECB has introduced varied arrangements over successive elections: a Facilitation Booth in Punakha for around 200 Lunana voters in the 2021 Local Government Elections; three extended polling stations for Laya and Lunana voters in Punakha and Soe Yag-sa voters in Paro in the 2023-24 National Assembly Elections; and a temporary polling booth regularly set up in Ramina for the 35 voters of Uesana, a village of the Lunana Gewog located distinctly apart and extremely difficult to access. In fact, Uesana voters who turn out to vote are offered compensation for the days spent walking to and from the booth, as for the 15 Uesana voters who turned out to vote in 2021.

The scale of the challenge was clearest in the 2013 National Council Election, when helicopter services transported election materials and polling officials to Lunana. In April 2023, adverse weather forced the Lunana common forum onto the telephone instead of in person. Emergency evacuations of election officials for health reasons occur from time to time and are often complicated by adverse weather conditions. During the 2018 National Assembly elections, the assistance of the Oscar-nominated *Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom* filming team was invaluable when weather delayed the medical evacuation of an official suffering from altitude sickness.

Accessibility and inclusion go beyond geography. The ECB's approach to disability access, drawing on Article 29 of the CRPD, translates that standard into two categories: persons with very limited mobility receive doorstep mobile booth service while those who can reach a polling station are assessed for ramp access, in-station assistance, or ballot in tactile format, with audio and braille versions of legal and voter education materials also provided. Registration is taken up during the Electoral Roll revision, claims and objections period, drawing on civil society databases and prior-election records, with follow-up for those not re-registered. In the 2023-24 National Assembly Elections, 2,216 persons with disabilities were registered, of whom 2,047 were facilitated in exercising their franchise.

The aim throughout is that geography, distance, seasonal movement or disability should not become a barrier to participation. The ECB manages these compounding challenges through innovation and planning, decentralised coordination, contingency arrangements and technology, including the new online Postal Ballot Registration System, piloted in the recent Thromde Elections and being improved for the second phase.

Bhutan has developed its democratic and electoral institutions over a relatively short period. How would you assess the evolution of the country's electoral system and what features of Bhutan's democratic experience do you consider particularly important in strengthening representative government?

Bhutan's electoral system has evolved steadily since the transition to constitutional parliamentary democracy in 2008, building on democratic practices and decentralised participatory decision-making already honed over decades of sterling leadership and establishing the institutions, laws, procedures and practices required under the Constitution adopted that year. This trajectory is reflected in the ECB Strategic Road Map 2026–36, launched on National Voters' Day, 15 September 2026, through the three strategic priorities of Voter Responsibility and Participation; Candidate and Party Competence and Accountability; and Institutional Excellence and Integrity. The first two focus on the participation and merit of voters, candidates and parties while the third focuses on the institutional capacity to deliver credible elections.

Political competition is evident over successive parliamentary elections. The first National Assembly election in 2008 saw Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) in power with People's Democratic Party (PDP) in Opposition with only two seats. In 2023–24, the PDP secured 30 of the 47 seats against 17 for

the Bhutan Tendrel Party (BTP) formed only a year earlier, as the Opposition. Across four Parliamentary elections under the Constitution to date, the electorate has elected three different parties to power, none with a back-to-back mandate, reflecting the development of competitive politics. Notably, this turnover has occurred even as the country's human development indicators improved steadily under successive governments, suggesting an electorate gaining confidence and maturity to test the system and explore options.

This churn at the national level sits against a more uneven picture at the local level. The 2023–24 National Assembly turnout was a healthy 65.60%, but the first phase of the ongoing Fourth Local Government Elections averaged only 33.92%. The stronger evidence of a system's resilience is not the turnover itself but that every Parliament and every Local Government since 2008 has completed its full term, with every transfer of power seamless, peaceful and orderly. Continued strengthening of grassroots democracy, informed participation and institutional independence will remain central to democratic consolidation. Nonetheless, representative government depends on sustained participation at every tier and turnout remains an area the Commission continues to watch closely.

Local Government institutions provide citizens with their most immediate interface with democratic governance. What lessons has the Election Commission drawn from successive Local Government elections and how can electoral participation at the grassroots level be further strengthened?

Article 22(1) of the Constitution puts this precisely: *power and authority shall be decentralized and devolved to elected Local Governments to facilitate the direct participation of the people in the development and management of their own social, economic and environmental well-being*. His Majesty The King, during the *Dhar* ceremony of the Gups on 12 October 2016, puts it more pithily still: *local government is not the lowest level of government but the nearest and closest level of government to the people*.

Successive Local Government Elections have reinforced that participation is strongest when citizens feel a direct connection between their vote and decisions affecting their own communities. The ECB prioritises continuous civic and voter education and decentralised outreach. Training of Trainers (ToT) programmes on civic education and sound dispute settlement, cascaded to the Gewog and Chiwog level across all 20 Dzongkhags are conducted ahead of elections and the

more generic Civic Education Programme for targeted groups during non-election periods.

Recent data also points to where strengthening is needed. Turnout in the first phase of the 2026 Local Government Elections averaged 33.92% and while women constituted 55.83% of those who voted, only two out of the total 47 elected to the 2023–24 National Assembly were women. Going forward, the ECB aims to strengthen grassroots participation through targeted education, youth and community outreach, partnerships with local institutions, accessible electoral services and appropriate technology, aiming at higher turnout as well as more informed, confident and active participation.

What measures does the Election Commission take to encourage greater electoral participation among women, youth, first-time voters and citizens living in remote areas? Are there any particular challenges in ensuring broader participation both as voters and candidates?

The ECB approaches electoral inclusion as participation both as voters and as candidates, combining continuous civic and voter education, targeted outreach and accessible services to efforts to close participation gaps.

For women, the ECB is increasingly focused on identifying the social, informational, logistical and institutional barriers affecting both voting and candidacy since strong voter turnout has not translated into representation. For young and first-time voters, the primary channels are the 166 *Democracy Clubs* in schools, colleges and training institutes alongside social media outreach, building democratic awareness and practical knowledge both before and after the age of franchise. First-time voters are given special attention and celebrated at polling stations, something Bhutanese mainstream media have also started to cover. For persons with disabilities, the ECB provides mobile booth service for those with very limited mobility and station-level facilitation for others. For voters in remote areas, extended or temporary polling stations and facilitation booths remain the primary response.

The continuing challenge is ensuring geography, age, gender, disability or circumstance does not limit meaningful participation. Candidacy data disaggregated by age is an area the Commission intends to report on more systematically, with greater attention also planned for first-time and elderly voters.

Civic and voter education has been an important component of the Election Commission's work. How do you assess the role of voter education, including engagement with young and future voters, in building a stronger democratic culture in Bhutan?

Civic and voter education is fundamental to the quality, integrity and sustainability of democracy. It helps citizens understand not only how to vote, but why participation matters, their rights and responsibilities and how democratic institutions function. The ECB treats it as a continuous process, not confined to election periods.

Particular emphasis is placed on young and future voters. Through Democracy Clubs, public outreach and educational partnerships, the Commission engages young people even before they become eligible voters. This builds on the ToT programmes for sustained civic and voter education at Gewog and Chiwog level nationwide. Civic information is also made accessible to citizens with diverse needs, including through translation of electoral laws into Braille or audio recordings.

The changing information environment requires a combination of face-to-face and digital approaches. The Commission uses its official website and multiple social media platforms, alongside television and community outreach. The long-term objective is to institutionalise democratic learning so that informed, ethical and meaningful participation becomes a continuous feature of Bhutanese democratic life.

Technology is becoming increasingly important in election administration. How does the Election Commission view the role of Electronic Voting Machines, postal ballots, digital voter services and other technology-based systems in making elections more efficient and accessible while maintaining security and public trust?

The ECB adopts technology where it demonstrably improves efficiency, accessibility, transparency, security and public trust, not for innovation's sake. Each system must fit Bhutan's context, be tested rigorously, be supported by law and designed with security safeguards.

Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) have been used in Bhutan since 2006, first for training and the Mock Elections, then for the National Council Elections in 2007-08 and National Assembly Elections in 2008. Standalone and air-gapped, they reduce exposure to remote cyber threats, while automating vote recording and tabulation and making the process accessible to voters with limited or no literacy. Postal ballots offer an alternative for eligible voters who cannot reach polling stations and the newly developed Postal Ballot Registration and Management System, piloted during the recent Thromde Elections is now being improved for the second phase of the local government elections, to make registration, verification, approval, printing and dispatch more systematic

and traceable.

The ERA System, a major step in digital transformation, piloted during the 2026 Thromde Elections, brings electoral activities into a more integrated system, with role-based access controls, audit trails and real-time dashboards. It is supported by ECB's Bhutan Electoral Registration Management System, Functional Literacy Test System, Political Party Registration System and EVM Management System. The Know Your Candidate (KYC) platform, Election Dispute Management System and an institutional AI chatbot are also under development.

Technology, however, is only one part of electoral trust. Strong laws, independent oversight, cybersecurity, rigorous testing, voter education and alternative non-digital channels remain essential so that a voter's access to the process never depends on connectivity, literacy, ability or location.

Social media, online misinformation and, increasingly, AI-generated or manipulated content are emerging challenges for election management bodies worldwide. How is the Election Commission of Bhutan preparing to address these issues while ensuring a free and informed electoral environment?

Social media has expanded the ECB's ability to communicate rapidly with voters, but it also creates risks from misinformation, deepfakes, impersonation and manipulated narratives. The Commission's approach is to protect the integrity of the information environment without restricting legitimate democratic expression.

This rests on prevention, early detection and rapid response. Social media rules and regulations provide a framework for electoral conduct, while the responsible-AI policy of the Bhutanese Government's GovTech Agency provides guidance on the ethical and controlled use of AI. The *Pulse-Point Electoral Lab* (Pulsers), the Commission's media monitoring initiative, helps identify emerging misinformation, hate speech, impersonation and coordinated manipulation, supported by listening tools that are being explored to assess reach and trends. The ECB also works with Bhutan Information, Communications and Media Authority and other agencies for verification, lawful action and engagement with platforms where necessary.

The *Know Your Candidate* platform, under development in partnership with the Gyalpozhing College of Information Technology (GCIT), will give voters access to verified candidate profiles, qualifications and manifestos rather than rumour. AI presents both opportunities and risks, which is why

responsible AI use is a stated intervention in the *ECB Strategic Roadmap (2026–36)*. The Commission uses AI to identify emerging narratives, information gaps and service needs, while treating deepfakes, cloned voices and automated disinformation as threats requiring stronger verification, digital literacy, cybersecurity and human oversight in equal measure. A well-informed electorate is itself part of the safeguard: when credible information reaches voters ahead of rumour, deception has less room to take hold.

Bhutan has established rules governing election conduct, campaign activities and election financing. How does the Election Commission ensure compliance by political parties, candidates and other electoral stakeholders and how effective have these mechanisms been in maintaining a fair and level electoral field?

The ECB ensures compliance through legal requirements, guidance, monitoring, reporting, transparency and enforcement. Bhutan's electoral legal framework rests on three Acts, the Election Act, the Public Election Fund Act and the National Referendum Act, supported by around 63 by-laws, guidelines, strategies, manuals and interpretations.

During elections, the ECB monitors campaign activities with Dzongkhag Election Authorities. Manifestos and pledges, advertising, media coverage and social-media activities are monitored and regulated through the independent manifesto evaluation committee, designated Media Arbitrators and Social-Media Monitors. Political parties and candidates alike are held to the same standard: in 2023–24, the Dzongkhag and Central Election Dispute Settlement Bodies and the Full Commission on appeal recorded 62 election-related cases in total, resulting in 28 warnings and public reprimands, 25 fines totalling Nu 720,000/- and 9 dismissals.

Campaign Finance is subject to specific accountability requirements. The separate bank accounts for campaign transactions, expenditure records and election returns, filed within a month of the declaration of results by political parties and candidates, are available for public inspection, scrutinised by the ECB and audited by the Royal Audit Authority (RAA). One area under careful examination is under-reporting of campaign expenditure. National Observers monitor throughout the election period and in a small society little escapes public view, but the concern remains genuine and the Commission is exploring how Bhutan's scale can be turned to advantage through peer review and near-instantaneous reporting. Where violations occur, the Commission can act, from warnings and fines to cancellation of candidature or disqualification. A

candidate from the 2018 National Assembly elections who delayed filing election returns without prior permission and remained unresponsive to calls for submission of accounts, was disqualified under Section 179(d) of the Election Act. The disqualification was challenged in courts and upheld.

This enforcement operates within a deliberately stringent Election Dispute Settlement system, required under Section 466 of the Election Act. Section 44 bars courts from questioning the legality of any Commission action or decision in connection with an election, except upon receiving an election petition or appeal. Chapter 20 governs how such petitions and appeals are brought, preventing baseless challenge of Commission decisions. It ensures no election dispute is left to languish outside the defined time-bound process and guards against elections and their outcomes being held hostage by cantankerous litigation while safeguarding a genuine avenue for redressal of legitimate grievance. Together, preventive regulation, monitoring, financial disclosure, public scrutiny and sanctions have strengthened transparency and accountability and helped maintain a fair and level electoral field.

The credibility of an election management body depends substantially upon its independence, neutrality and public confidence. What institutional practices have helped the Election Commission of Bhutan preserve these principles and what more can be done to strengthen public trust in electoral institutions?

The credibility of the Election Commission of Bhutan rests on its constitutional and legal independence, impartiality and consistent application of electoral laws. This independence is structural: Article 24(2) of the Constitution specifies that the Chief Election Commissioner and two Election Commissioners are to be appointed by the Druk Gyalpo from names recommended jointly by the Prime Minister, the Chief Justice, the Speaker, the Chairperson of the National Council and the Leader of the Opposition, a cross-branch, cross-party nomination that no single authority controls.

Under Sections 41 and 42 of the Election Act, the Commission has full authority over its own financial and personnel management. Its budget, approved by Parliament and charged on the Consolidated Fund of Bhutan, is protected even against legislative delay, the Ministry of Finance is required to provide interim funds at least equal to the previous year's allocation should Parliament fail to act on time. ECB staff are not civil servants under the Royal Civil Service Commission, but public servants governed by the Commission's own service terms, though it remains subject to the same standards of budgetary

and financial prudence and to statutory audit by the Royal Audit Authority. Section 583 goes further, placing moral responsibility on Parliament itself to ensure no future amendment undermines the Commission's authority or effectiveness.

But independence must also be demonstrated through everyday practice. The ECB places emphasis on transparent decision-making, equal treatment of electoral stakeholders, clear and timely communication, effective grievance mechanisms and accountability. On 17 December 2018, at the 111th National Day celebrations in Samtse, His Majesty The King awarded the institutional *Druk Thuksey*, one of the nation's highest honours, to the ECB in recognition of the successful conduct of elections since 2008.

Public confidence must nonetheless be earned continuously and cannot rest on past laurels. Strengthening institutional capacity, data security, accessible information, feedback mechanisms and the professional development of election officials will matter going forward. Public trust ultimately depends on sustained alignment between the Commission's mandate, its decisions and its actions, a standard the institution has been held to and has met, since its founding.

Looking ahead, what electoral reforms, administrative improvements or institutional innovations would you consider important for further strengthening Bhutan's electoral process? What lessons from recent parliamentary and Local Government Elections would particularly inform these reforms?

Electoral Reform should ultimately improve the quality of democratic outcomes while preserving fairness, integrity and public trust. Recent elections point to both specific and general needs: the Thromde turnout of 33.92%, further facilitation for persons with disabilities and the continuing gap between women's strong voter turnout and their weak representation in elected office. Women's representation is a concern in its own right: one that international experience and research links to system design and party nomination practices alongside social and cultural attitudes. Addressing these factors calls for a whole-of-system approach beyond an election management body's mandate, even as the Commission works to ensure a credible, merit-based system that enables capable candidates to emerge.

A key priority is responsible digital transformation building on the integrated electoral cycle already underway through the ERA System. Future work will expand transparency measures, including peer-review and instantaneous reporting, to address under-reporting concerns, alongside stronger cybersecurity and data governance, continuing the responsible-AI

commitment already set out in the Strategic Roadmap, with technology kept transparent, auditable and subject to human oversight throughout. Stronger succession planning, professional development and structured exchange of international good practice will help preserve institutional knowledge as the Commission grows.

Bhutan's *Democracy House* has potential to be further developed as a national learning centre and repository of institutional memory. Post-election reviews should translate into operational lessons into concrete reforms, guided by the *Learning From Experience* programme, which the Commission intends to strengthen further. The central lesson from past elections is that each election should become the foundation for improving the next, as a standard practice.

India and Bhutan are close neighbours and democratic partners. In your view, what areas of election management — such as voter education, technology, training of election officials, electoral integrity and institutional capacity-building — offer the greatest scope for mutual learning and cooperation between the Election Commission of Bhutan and the Election Commission of India?

India and Bhutan's partnership in election management dates back decades, to the very early days of ECB's establishment. Within weeks of the Royal Decree of 31 December 2005 appointing Bhutan's first Chief Election Commissioner, the Election Commission of India (ECI) stepped forward as a reliable partner. A Memorandum of Understanding was signed in May 2006, renewed in 2011 and again in 2019, anchoring cooperation that has run continuously for two decades.

That history has left a tangible mark on Bhutan's electoral infrastructure. ECB chose to adopt EVMs nationwide from its very first elections rather than phasing them. India gifted 4,140 EVMs in 2006 and recently, ECI facilitated the purchase of 2,000 additional EVMs, proof that the partnership remains as active today as at its founding. *Democracy House*, ECB's institutional home in Thimphu, was built with funding support from the Government of India and inaugurated in 2015.

Capacity building has been the partnership's deepest investment. Bhutanese officials shaped their first Election Bill with input from senior Indian election practitioners and legal advisors; hundreds have since passed through the India International Institute of Democracy and Election Management (IIIDEM) and the International Election Visitors' Programme, in areas ranging from EVM operation to strategic leadership and, recently, artificial intelligence in elections. In 2025 and 2026 alone, dozens of ECB officials completed

IIIDEM capacity-building and electoral resilience programmes and Election Commission of India officials were present as visitors, as recently as the first phase of the Fourth Local Government Elections.

Bhutan's experience managing elections across extreme terrain, Facilitation Booths, extended polling stations and door-step service for voters with limited mobility may be of interest for any election body managing remote or difficult-access constituencies. Bhutan's small population has similarly become a deliberate advantage rather than a constraint, allowing con-

ducive lab-like conditions to innovate, build, test, refine, test again and scale quickly. At the India International Conference on Democracy and Election Management in New Delhi in January 2026, ECB joined election management bodies from 42 nations and over 70 institutions in adopting the *Delhi Declaration*, five pillars covering purity of electoral rolls, conduct of elections, research and publications, use of technology and training and capacity building, moving election cooperation from isolated exchanges toward a connected global effort. The future should deepen what two decades have already built. ■

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National Voters' Day, Bhutan

15 September 2026

Bhutan observes National Voters' Day (NVD) on 15 September, deliberately aligned with the UN International Day of Democracy. First marked nationwide by the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) in 2014, it serves as an annual instrument of civic mobilisation rather than a ceremonial fixture; it lapsed only once, in 2020, owing to COVID-19.

The 2026 Observance

The national function, held under the theme "Reimagining Democracy: Celebrating Partnership, Inspiring Participation," ran alongside celebrations in all 20 Dzongkhags. HRH Princess Sonam Dechan Wangchuck, Founding President of JSW School of Law, Pangbisa, Paro, was Guest of Honour; Gyanesh Kumar, the 26th Chief Election Commissioner of India, was Chief Guest. His visit marked two decades of formal ECB–ECI partnership since the ECB's founding in 2006 — a relationship that has grown from sharing electoral knowledge and technology into institutional development, capacity building and professional exchange. In his keynote he outlined the scale of India's electoral operations and urged young Bhutanese to exercise their franchise.

Initiatives Launched

- ECB Strategic Road Map 2026–2036 — sets out the ECB's strategic direction and priorities for the next decade of electoral administration.
- Election Result Administration (ERA) System — a

digital system managing the entire electoral cycle, from electoral rolls to results and reporting.

- Thromde Election Report 2026 — documents the conduct of the 2026 municipal elections as an institutional record and future reference.
- eLearning4 Electoral Integrity — a digital learning platform building the skills, ethics and professionalism of ECB officials.

Public Engagement

Winners of the "Democracy Reels" competition, launched on 20 August and drawing 71 entries from Democracy Club members and citizens, were awarded, and attendees recited the National Voters' Pledge. Celebrations continued on 16 September at Democracy House, Thimphu, with interactive zones on digital services, the voting process, an education hub and a quiz.

Significance

The 2026 edition looked outward, foregrounding bilateral EMB cooperation and a decade-long digital agenda — a reminder that, for a democracy barely two decades old, credible elections rest on informed participation as much as on sound administration.

Sources: Election Commission of Bhutan, "National Voter's Day," news release, 15 September 2026 (ecb.bt/national-voters-day-5); background from earlier ECB NVD releases (2014, 2017, 2021). ■

— IJES Research Desk