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Q&A  
Jigme Yoser Thinley

## HAPPY NOW? —*Bhutan*

### Preface

The nation that had no TV until 10 years ago and is famous for using its Gross National Happiness index as a measure of success rather than GDP, has been a democracy for just over a year. Monocle talks to its prime minister about how times are changing.

WRITER

*Danielle Demetriou*

PHOTOGRAPHER

*Koomi Kim*

In March 2008, Bhutan's royal family eased its grip – willingly – over the Himalayan nation and the first democratic elections took place. The people chose Jigme Yoser Thinley to lead them as prime minister. Thinley, who won a landslide victory with his Bhutan Peace and Prosperity Party, is no stranger to power. He had been PM twice before (but at a time when the position was nominated by ministers selected by the king).

The prime minister faces a big task: dragging Bhutan out of impoverishment and into the 21st century but without damaging the country's cherished values. The landlocked nation, wedged between its powerful neighbours India and China, has a population of 666,900 and only allowed television and the internet 10 years ago.

Other eye-catching aspects of the Buddhist kingdom include its Gross National Happiness policies, which promote the quest for spiritual contentment over material gain. Its breathtaking scenery and Buddhist cultural heritage have propelled Bhutan to the top of many



travellers' wish lists but it is has only a clutch of five-star hotels and visitors must book through a government-registered tour operator and pay a minimum daily tariff (\$200 in high season) in advance.

Perhaps the most controversial issue the country faces is how to deal with an estimated 120,000 Nepalese minority refugees. It was in 1989 under the previous king that a controversial "One Bhutan, One People" policy was adopted enforcing the indigenous Ngalong culture, language and religion. This paved the way for the discrimination and departure of thousands of citizens of Nepalese ethnic origin. With most now located in refugee camps in Nepal, the two nations have long been locked into dispute over who is responsible for them.

Speaking in his suite at Tokyo's Imperial Hotel after attending a conference in Fukuoka to talk about happiness policies, Thinley describes the challenges ahead as he guides the nation through its first years of democracy.

**Monocle:** *In March last year the nation's first democratic elections were held. How has the country changed?*

**Jigme Yoser Thinley:** We have changed considerably – from a monarchy we have now become a constitutional democratic monarchy whereby the king no longer plays a part in the governance of the country. Party politics was something that the Bhutanese were psychologically unprepared for, seeing how it affects stability in many of the so-called democracies in the world today, so people were worried. But the change has happened, we now have two political parties and one of them is in government.

**M:** *How has life evolved since then?*

**JY:** Life has not changed because we have made deliberate efforts to ensure that none of the negative drawbacks of party politics come to Bhutan.

**M:** *What are the challenges for Bhutan in adjusting to being a democratic monarchy?*

**JY:** The highest priority is to ensure that democracy takes firm root in the first five years. And the second objective is to ensure that within the first five years we



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are able to deliver basic services such as primary education being immediately accessible, with no children having to walk more than one hour to school. Every district hospital should have two doctors and two ambulances. Every *gewog* [division within prefectures] should be accessed by multiple roads and every home have electricity and safe drinking water.

**M:** *Can you explain what Gross National Happiness [GNH] is?*

**JY:** GNH is based on the theory that since happiness is the ultimate desire of every human being, it is the responsibility of the policy-makers to create conditions whereby citizens can pursue happiness. Happiness is a state that one is able to attain when equilibrium is achieved between the body's material needs and the mind's emotional and psychological needs.

**M:** *How difficult is it to reconcile the pursuit of happiness with government policy?*

**JY:** Not difficult at all. In Bhutan we have still to create the material conditions that are pre-conditions to pursuing happiness. But I believe it is achievable if one reminds oneself that what I need, and what I want, is happiness, which does not come from material gains alone.

**M:** *How happy is Bhutan?*

**JY:** Bhutan is 97 per cent happy, according to a national survey in 2005 and the next will be in 2010. We have four pillars, which are divided into nine domains and these represent almost every aspect of human life, which are important to conditioning the physical and mental state of mind. These nine domains are further

divided into 72 variables and each is rated numerically. Then when you put it all together, you get the GNH aggregate.

**M:** *Has Bhutan been affected by the global recession?*

**JY:** Bhutan has achieved in the first quarter of this year economic growth of 8 per cent. This is because we are not exposed to the outside market and there is still considerable investment being made into infrastructure development, which ensures there is enough employment. But it's mainly because our growth has never been GDP led. We have pursued a model that would not be vulnerable to the increasingly volatile nature of the market. In fact, GNH suggests movement away from consumerism and market forces.

**M:** *Bhutan is regarded by some as an elitist tourist destination. Why is this?*

**JY:** We would like to share our environmental and cultural heritage. But at the same time we have to be very mindful of the fragility of these heritage forms. We cannot allow mass tourism unless we want to undermine these assets for which we have the responsibility for passing on to future generations.

**M:** *What is the government doing to tackle the Nepalese refugee situation?*

**JY:** Resolution requires bilateral agreements between Bhutan and Nepal. The two nations have equal responsibility and we have not been able to make recent progress because of the political and security instability in Nepal. What we have is not so much a refugee problem as a humanitarian problem. Of the 100,000 people in camps, some 18,000 people have already been resettled, mainly in the US, and this will go on.

**M:** *What are the parallels between Bhutan and your hosts today, Japan?*

**JY:** Japan is at one end of development, and we are at the lower end of development. But otherwise there are many similarities in our value systems, customs and traditions. These similarities have created an affinity between these two countries, which has translated into very close cooperation. — (M)

## Bhutan: factfile

- 01 Bhutan's handsome 29-year-old king, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, was educated in the US, India and Oxford and was crowned last November.
- 02 Inheritance follows the female rather than male line in Bhutan, with daughters inheriting the family home.
- 03 In 2007, Bhutan was the world's second fastest growing economy – after Azerbaijan – with a growth rate of 22.4 per cent.
- 04 The national sport is archery – "dha" – with bows set 140m away compared to the Olympic's 50m.
- 05 Everyone must wear national dress – knee-length "gho" for men and ankle-length "kira" dresses for women – in public during daylight hours. Textiles, colours and decorations reveal social status.

## CV Jigme Yoser Thinley

- 1952:** Born in Bumthang
- 1974:** Joins the civil service
- 1994:** Appointed deputy minister of home affairs and permanent representative to the UN
- 1998:** Named prime minister as part of a rotation system overseen by the king
- 2003:** Takes up prime minister role for a second time
- 2007:** Elected leader of the Bhutan Peace and Prosperity Party
- 2008:** First democratic elections in which Thinley's party wins 44 out of 47 National Assembly seats
- 2008:** Appointed first democratically elected prime minister