

Statement of Thrizin Sonam Kinga

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“Promoting Cultural Pluralism and pace through inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogue”

- Isn't it interesting that Bhutan, a small Kingdom in the Himalayas is in some sense very large at the same time?
- Isn't it telling that this small Kingdom has survived through the centuries as a sovereign, peace-loving, tolerant and progressive society?
- Isn't its story of building a culturally pluralistic and spiritually tolerant society under selfless, caring and visionary leaders worthy of your kind attention?

Madam President, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

With deep humility, I extend to you the greetings of His Majesty King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, who is deeply loved and respected by the Bhutanese people for keeping our small country united and sovereign, for ensuring harmony amongst diverse ethno-linguistic groups, for protecting devotees of all religions, and for championing the cause of our democracy.

The small Kingdom of Bhutan with less than 1 million people and about 38000 square kilometers in size is nevertheless characterized by large diversity of 24 very different ethnic-linguistic groups. Although Buddhism is the predominant faith, there is also a sizeable Hindu following. Within Buddhism and Hinduism, there are different schools and sects. Some new faiths are also emerging.

With the introduction of parliamentary democracy in 2008, Bhutan moved from being a unicameral legislature EARLIER to a bi-cameral legislature NOW in order to enhance political accommodation for the large diversity of our small country. Therefore, members of the apolitical 'upper chamber' called the National Council are directly nominated and elected by grassroots communities. This chamber provides the political space for equal representation of different ethno-linguistic groups irrespective of the sizes of their communities. Even in the 'popular' party-

based lower chamber called the National Assembly, constituencies have been delimited to enable fair and balanced representation across ethnic lines. Moreover, these ethnic communities which are administratively categorized into districts and sub-districts have their own local governments.

Hence, parliamentary democracy, which was introduced NOT as a consequence of popular demand but the WILL of our beloved Fourth King, strengthened the institutional framework and political spaces for inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogue to mediate differences and synthesize common aspirations! By saying thus, I do not wish to suggest in any way that political institutions and processes did not exist before 2008 to facilitate such dialogues. In fact, representations in the earlier National Assembly, which was first established in 1953, a conciliar body called the Royal Advisory Council of 1965 as well as community development assemblies established after 1980s had very strong and balanced ethnic basis.

Allow me to highlight Madam President that there are also dedicated national holidays, festivals and sites of worship for both Buddhists and Hindus. Although His Majesty the King is a Buddhist, Hindu temples have been built with royal patronage. The royal family participates in important Hindu rituals and hosts Hindu ceremonies in the palace premise.

Cultural pluralism, Madam President, is therefore not something NEW that we seek to promote NOW in the context of present-day dynamics of globalization and migration. In fact, cultural pluralism and spiritual tolerance have always been the defining character of Bhutanese society. Our socio-political institutions and policies have reflected this character. Freedom of religion is guaranteed by the Constitution. His Majesty the King is the protector of all faiths.

There is however, an emerging concern! Non-indigenous institutions and non-state agencies from ELSEWHERE are forcing poorer and vulnerable members of our society to change faiths by offering inducements of cash and other benefits. They take advantage of the leniency of our laws against such change of faith effected by inducements and questionable means. This has become a matter of concern.

As much as we uphold the constitutional rights of citizens to practice whatever faith they choose to believe in, we also need to protect vulnerable members of our society from being forced to change faiths through inducements of monetary benefits and other questionable means. Otherwise, this will lead to inter-faith and inter-ethnic disputes, which will undermine the peace and stability of our small country. I would like to hope that such challenges which other nations and communities may face also receive due consideration of the distinguished delegates in our debate.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Madam Chairperson and the Russian Federation for your warm hospitality. I also congratulate and thank President Saber Choudhary for his successful tenure and wish him the very best hereafter. I also wish the two candidates for IPU President very well for their elections and assure that Bhutan will extend our full support and cooperation as the new President begins her service to our organization.

Thank you and Tashi Delek!