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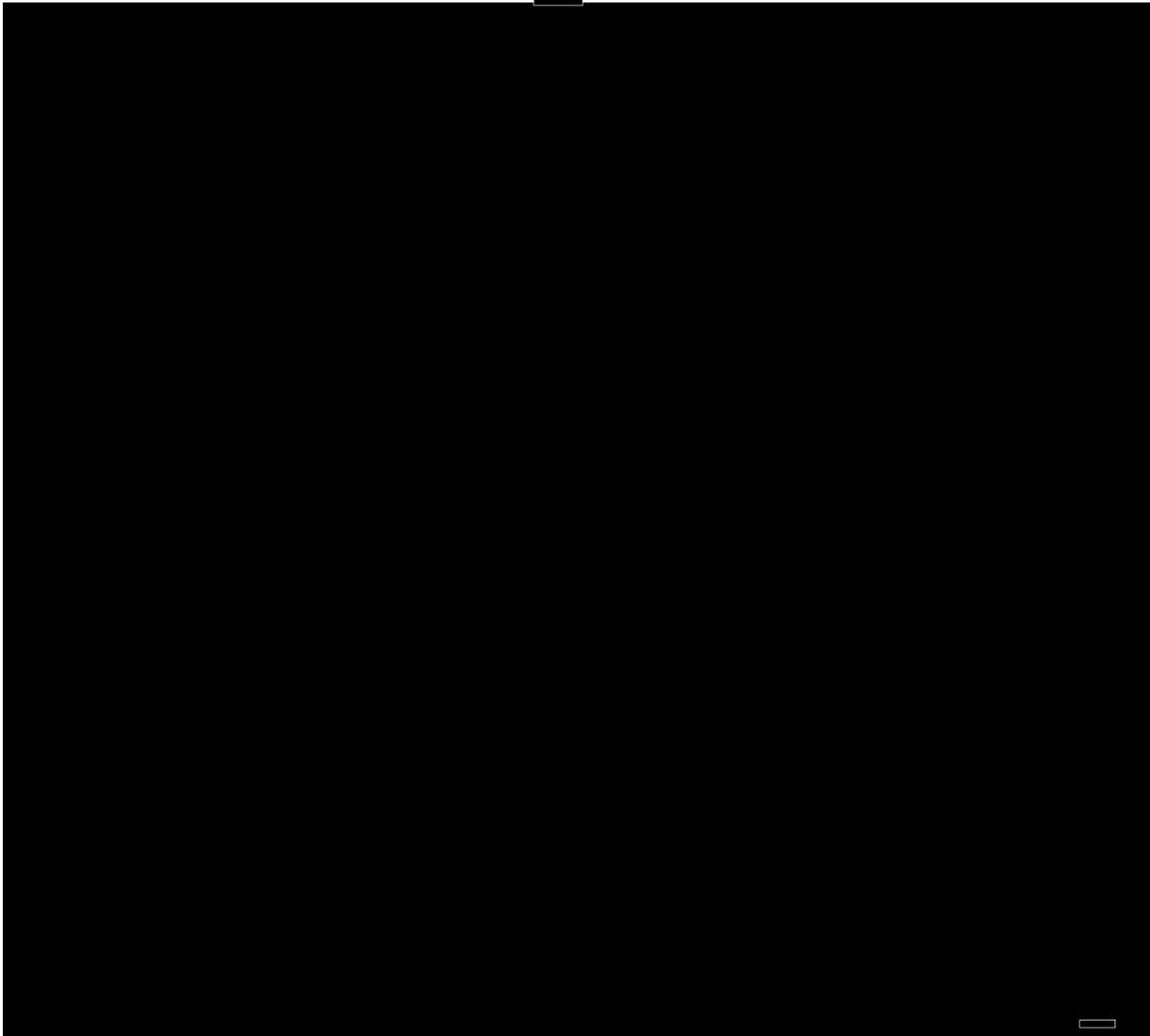
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Near East and
South Asia Review



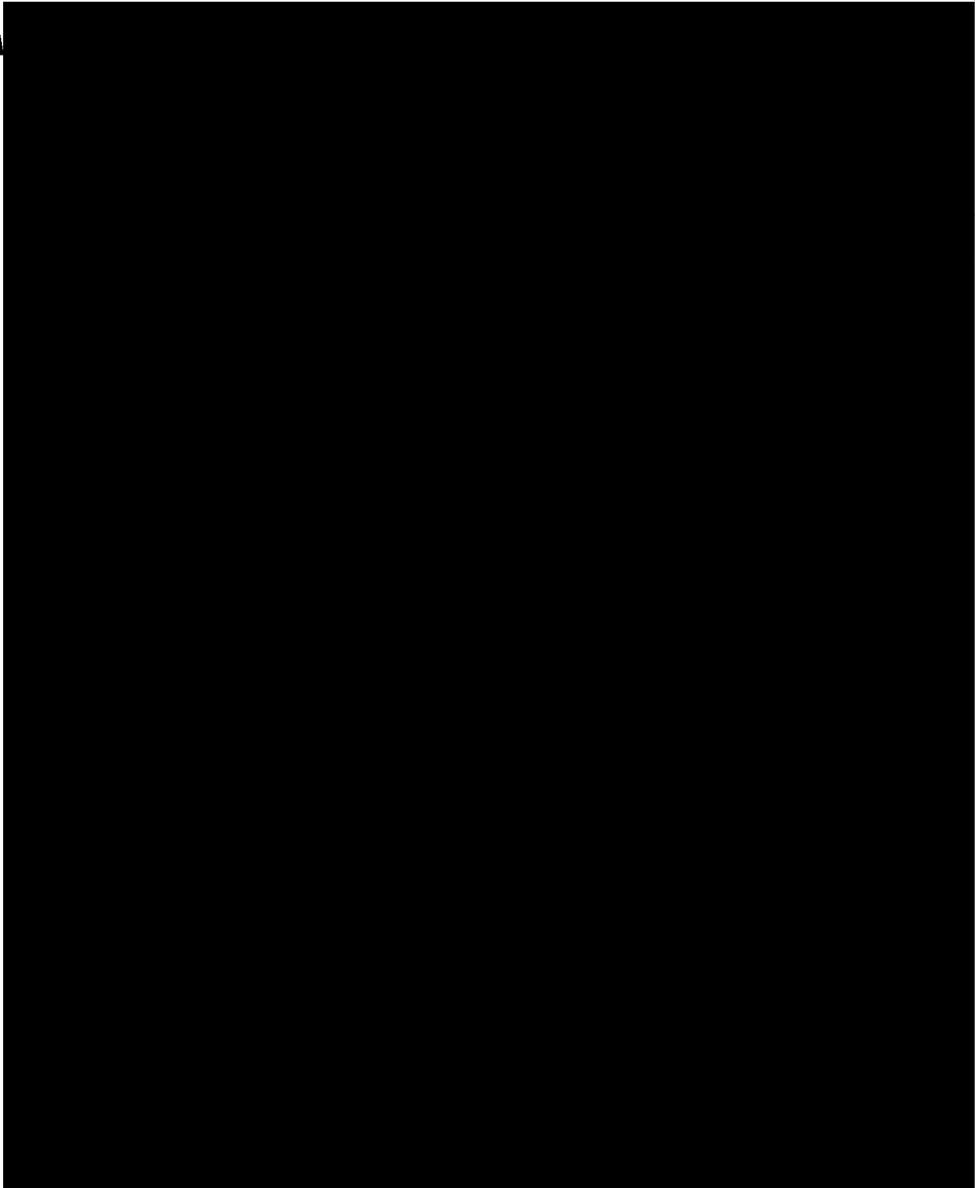
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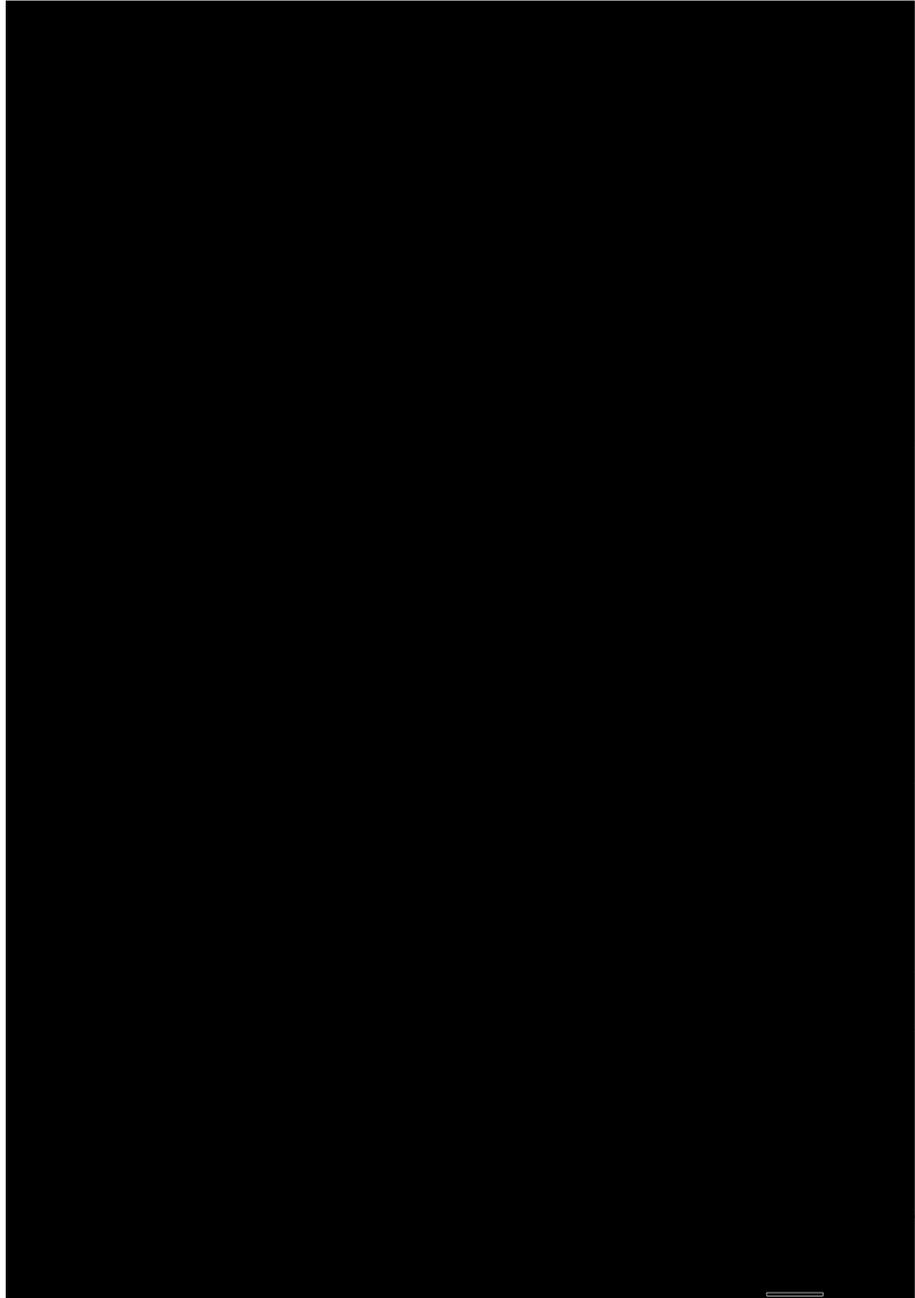
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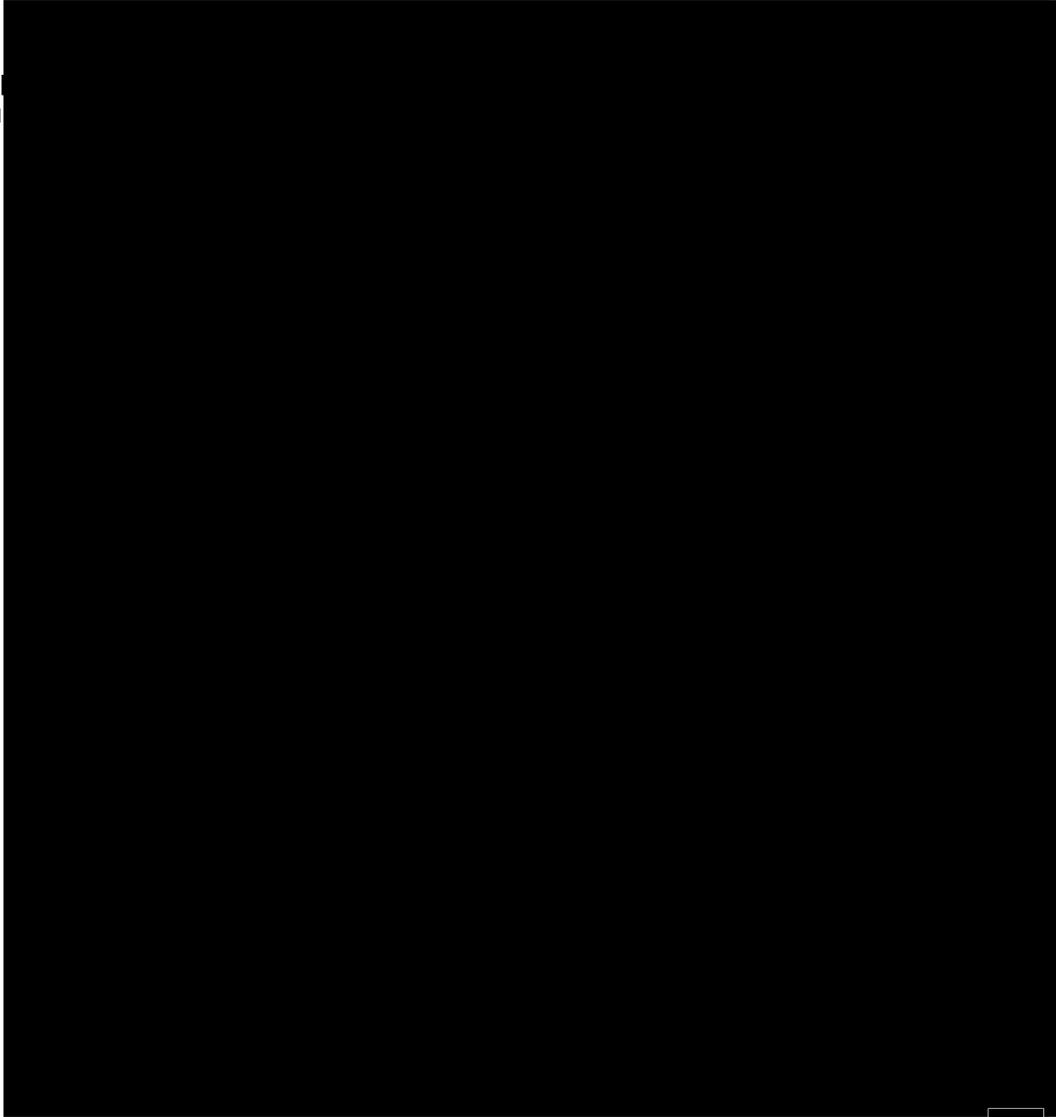
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Bhutan, the Dragon Kingdom: Eyeing Modernization
Cautiously (S-1)

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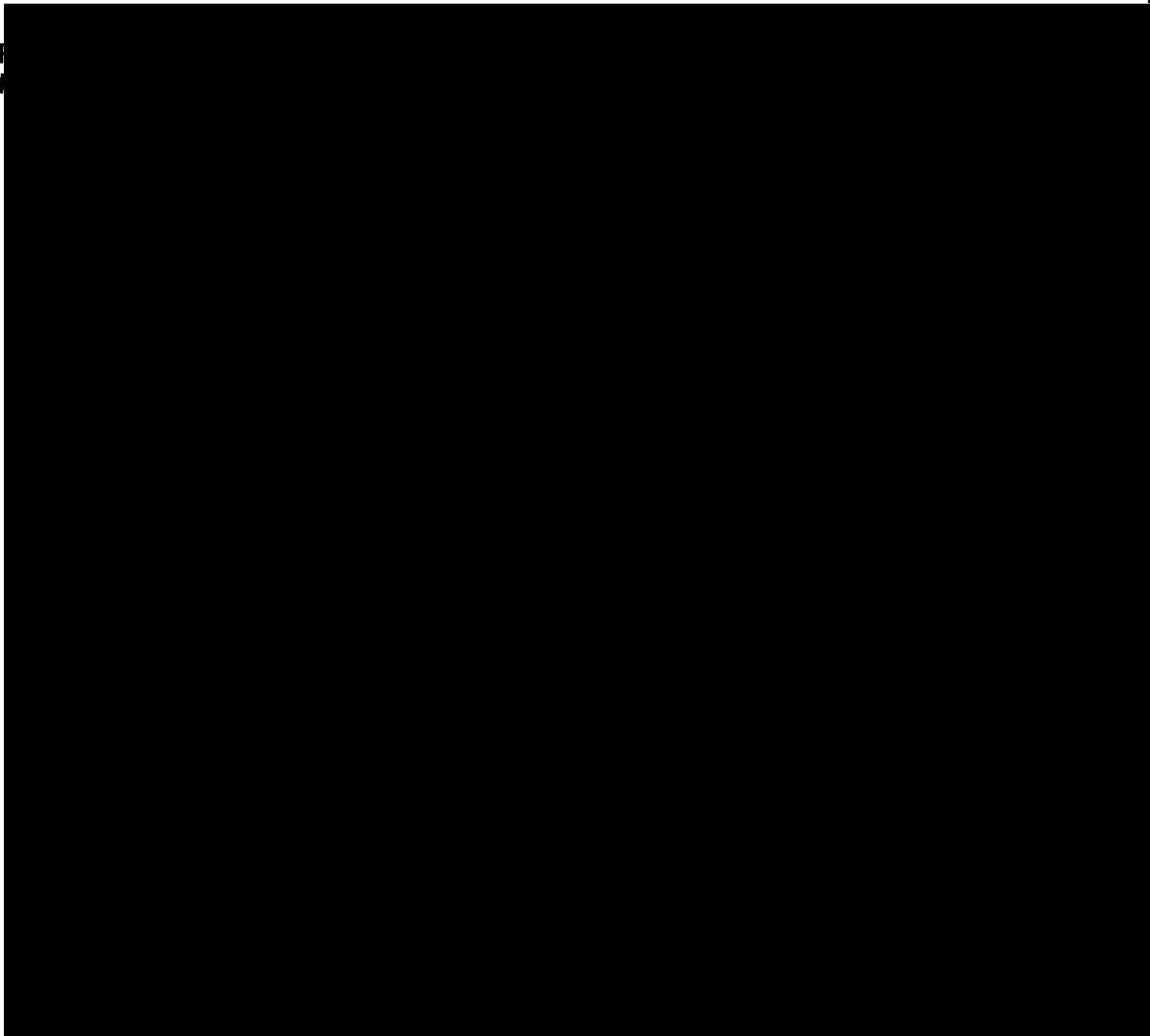
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The landlocked Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan is seeking to break out of its isolation and gradually introduce modernizing influences from abroad. At the same time, the government is taking steps to curb the impact of foreign cultural influence [REDACTED]

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**Bhutan, the Dragon Kingdom:
Eyeing Modernization
Cautiously**

The landlocked Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan is moving cautiously to modernize, stepping back when outside influences threaten its highly traditional culture. Bhutanese leaders are seeking to break out of their isolation through expanded diplomatic relations, increased trade and economic aid agreements, and ambitious development projects. At the same time, the government is curtailing the presence of foreign workers and tourists and restricting the use of Western dress and media products in an effort to preserve the kingdom's country's heritage.

Because pressures to develop are not as strong as they are in other Third World countries, slow modernization probably will not arouse significant popular discontent. Nevertheless, Bhutanese who are benefiting from rising educational and economic levels are acquiring a taste for modernization. Their contacts with the outside world will prompt them to adopt more of its values and lifestyles at the expense of Bhutan's traditional culture.

Looking to Update the Bureaucracy

Political power in Bhutan rests in the monarchy, which has run the country since 1907. King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who has governed for 17 years, is trying to inject change and expand the political process gradually. He is a popular and practical leader, noted for his hard work to improve the welfare of his people.

Wangchuck is increasingly delegating authority to his Council of Ministers as part of his effort to broaden the political system. He also looks to a national assembly known as the Tshogdu, a 152-member body of elected district and village representatives, to enact legislation and approve senior appointments. The assembly meets twice yearly for one to two weeks, and academic studies note that debates among members can be heated.

Although Bhutan's civil service system is small, Bhutanese officials admitted last December that Wangchuck's administrative

Bhutan at a Glance

Bhutan, about 47,000 square kilometers in area, is nearly the size of Vermont and New Hampshire combined. Much of the population lives in remote valleys that are just beginning to be touched by modern development and engage in subsistence agriculture.

The majority of Bhutan's population of 1.5 million are Bhotias—Buddhists of Tibetan descent—who dominate the government and the clergy. People of Nepalese origin and a number of small tribal groups account for much of the rest of the population. Most of the Nepalese were brought in as part of a foreign work force.

Because of difficult communications and transportation, most Bhutanese communities have traditionally been self-sufficient, meeting basic needs through farming, raising livestock, cottage industries, and trade. Compared to much of South Asia, living standards are fairly good.

Bhutan's official language, Dzongkha, is similar to Tibetan. A number of dialects are spoken in highland villages, and Nepali is widely spoken in the south. The medium of instruction is generally English.

decentralization program was having a hard time getting off the ground. most Bhutanese ministries and departments are poorly institutionalized because of Bhutan's highly personalized bureaucracy. Without formal charters spelling out their functions, many of these agencies still depend on their leaders' assertiveness or personal rapport with the King to define their responsibilities and political influence. Under this system, decisionmaking can be brought to a standstill when a ranking bureaucrat is absent.

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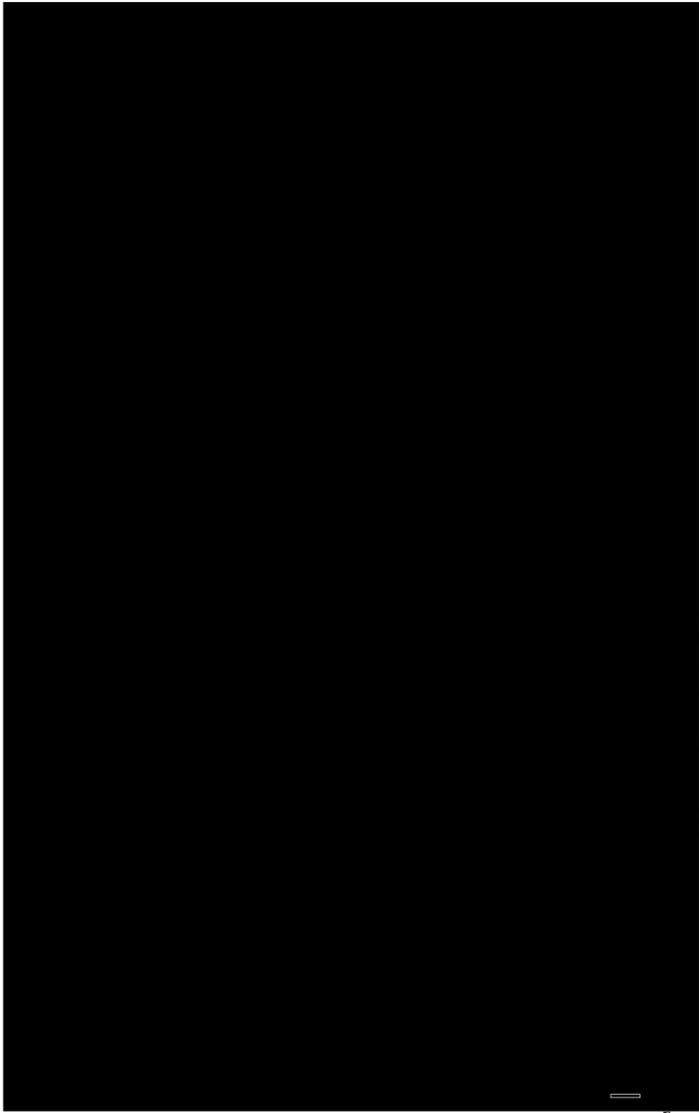
The King's effort to improve the civil service is generating some differences among government employees. New entrants to the service are often better educated than their superiors, who have frequently worked their way up the ranks by working long years in impoverished Bhutanese villages. Senior officers resent the impatience and pretensions of younger civil servants who believe they are due a more privileged position by virtue of their credentials and should be able to forgo work in the rural areas. This problem is not a major one but could delay Wangchuck's efforts to decentralize government authority.

Wangchuck also is trying to reduce government corruption. while several high-level officials have been imprisoned for embezzlement, skimming public funds is still considered a perquisite of high office, and most senior Bhutanese officials manage to avoid prosecution. Wangchuck's anticorruption efforts probably face an uphill battle because corruption is embedded in the country's feudal political culture.

Straddling Modernization

Despite Wangchuck's desire to bring progress to Bhutan, he is cautious about contact with the outside world that could threaten Bhutanese culture. The few visitors allowed entry into Bhutan indicate the government is growing warier of the effects of modernization on national self-reliance and the country's cultural heritage. It is concerned about the influx of tourists, expatriate workers, and foreign businessmen and the emergence of a growing middle class that favors Western dress, videos, Japanese automobiles, and foreign education. Bhutanese monks have been instrumental in advocating the preservation of traditional Bhutanese values and the need to limit foreign cultural influence.

The government is taking steps that will probably only slow—not halt—the impact of modernizing influences. It recently raised the daily tariff for tourists, who are allowed to visit in package tours only, from \$150 to \$250. Apparently willing to lose revenue to preserve Bhutan's traditions, the government has allowed entry to no more than 2,000



tourists a year. In an apparent contradiction to its policy, Bhutan's National Druk Airlines has added a third aircraft and expanded its services beyond Calcutta and Kathmandu to Bangkok; Tokyo may soon also be included. Both are convenient transit points for travelers to South Asia.

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