

Fourth Parliamentary Elections of Bhutan, 2023/24

National Council Elections 2023

The 2023 Parliamentary Elections, the fourth after Bhutan transitioned to a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy form of government in 2008, are underway. The elections are state funded. The electoral system follows the first-past-the-post principle. All aspiring candidates will have to have a minimum qualification of bachelor's degree and be 25 years of age.

The Parliament of Bhutan consists of three institutions, The Druk Gyalpo (His Majesty the King), the National Council (NC) and the National Assembly (NA). The Parliament convenes twice a year. There is a provision for extraordinary session.

The NC, equivalent to Upper Chamber in the Westminster system, comprises of 25 members, one member from each of the 20 Dzongkhags (districts) and 5 eminent members nominated by the Druk Gyalpo. The House enjoy the same legislative functions and authority as the NA except that money and financial bills can originate only in the NA. However, the NC can deliberate on money and financial bills and submit its non-binding recommendations to the NA. Within the ambit of legislative functions, the NC is associated with review functions - review of policies and legislations concerning national sovereignty and security - earning the epithet, 'the House of Review'.

The members serve for five years. Given its review functions, the constitution enshrines the NC as a continuous house by which the incumbents do not have to resign to recontest. However, for the second parliamentary elections in 2013, the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) stated that the incumbents would have to resign to recontest. The Supreme Court was reported to have said that the incumbents may not be required to resign. However, the ECB took the Supreme Court's interpretation as an advisory opinion. With no incumbents taking the matter to the court (High Court and Supreme Court) for the interpretation of the constitution, the incumbents resigned leaving the NC without a quorum if an extraordinary session had been required. After the elections, in 2014, the second parliament amended the National Council Act making it explicit that the incumbents need not have to resign to recontest. The continuity of the House can be inferred from its naming/labelling of the sessions. The latest session the NC convened was its 30th session, 10 sessions in five years for one cohort of councillors. The Druk Gyalpo's nominations do not follow the election cycle; they are the prerogative of the Druk Gyalpo. From its 25 members, the House elects a Chairperson and a Deputy Chairperson.

The NC candidates contest as individuals. The Constitution bars both the candidates and elected NC members to have an affiliation with the political parties. Thus the NC is non-partisan. For the 2023 elections, citing the need to have competent pool of Members of Parliament, the ECB adopted a rule requiring candidates aspiring to contest for the NC to have 10 years of experience, and 5 years of experience for the NA. The poll day for the NC elections is on 20 April 2023. The candidates will have to observe a 48-hour no-campaign period in lead up to the poll day.

National Assembly Elections 2023/ 2024

The National Assembly elections determine the formation of the government, after the two rounds of elections, Primary and General rounds. All political parties registered with the ECB can contest the elections. For the NA, the country is divided into constituencies. There shall be no more than seven and no less than two constituencies in any Dzongkhag and the total members of the NA shall not exceed fifty-five. Currently, there are 47 constituencies, Trashigang with five, Samtse with four, Mongar and Pema Gastshel with three each and rest 16 Dzongkhags have two each. No more than two cabinet ministers can be appointed from the electoral constituencies of one Dzongkhag. Recently, the number of ministries had been reduced from initial 10 to 9, after mergers and renaming of a few.

During the Primary Round of Elections, the electorate votes for parties (rather than individual candidates). The two parties securing the highest votes nationally go on to contest the General Round. In the General Round, the electorate votes for candidates, with the party securing the most seats (winning the majority of the constituencies) forming the government. The losing party serves as the Opposition. The NA can be dissolved prematurely if a motion of no confidence is moved against the government (the ruling party) and is passed. The NA elects the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker from among its elected members. To date, both the positions have been assumed by the members of the ruling party.

The present government will end its five-year term in November 2023 and the NA will be dissolved. An Interim Government with the Chief Justice of Bhutan as the Chief Advisor will be appointed by the Druk Gyalpo. The next government should be formed within 90 days of the dissolution of the NA. Tentatively, the NA elections for the fourth parliament will be held between December 2023 and January/February 2024; thus the second, General, round will be in early 2024. All political parties get state funding. However, if a party fails to secure 10 percent of the votes, nationally, the party will not get state funding for the next elections. There are five registered political parties, as of April 2023; two newly registered parties are to contest the upcoming NA elections.

All Bills passed come into force after the Royal Assent. In case, there are disputes in certain bills, the two houses deliberate in a Joint Sitting on the command of the Druk Gyalpo. The Joint Sitting takes place in the National Assembly Hall and is presided by the Speaker (of the NA). The Druk Gyalpo attends the opening and the closing session of every parliamentary session, may address either of the houses or both (in the Joint Sitting) as well as send messages as deemed expedient.