

Desi

The Desi (ལྷོ་ལྷོ་) institution is a Himalayan socio-political office, which was known in Tibet at least since the 14th century. It literally refers to a person in a province or group (ལྷོ་ལྷོ་) who holds political power (ལྷོ་ལྷོ་). Desi, also known as Depa (ལྷོ་ལྷོ་) or group leader, thus refers to a ruler or chieftain of a polity or region. In Bhutan, the term Desi came to be used in the middle of the 17th century although the term Depa appears to have been in use long before that.

The office of the Desi in Bhutan was created in Bhutan by Zhapdrung Ngawang Namgyel (1594-1651) when he established the Drukpa state and instituted the dual system of religious and temporal law. Under the apex (ལྷོ་ལྷོ་) office held by Zhapdrung himself and planned to be held by his physical heirs, the Desi post was created as the main secular office initially held by Zhapdrung's steward or *changzö* (ལྷོ་ལྷོ་). Tenzin Chögyel, a Bhutanese monk from the family of Obtsho in Gönpö held the position of Zhapdrung's steward after he received his training in Ralung monastery and reached the post of a preceptor or *umze* (དུང་ལྷོ་). In the latter part of his life, Tenzin Chögyel was thus known as Desi Umzé or Desi Changzö. The Portuguese visitors who spent time with Zhapdrung Ngawang Namgyel in 1627 in Bhutan, described Tenzin Chögyel as the 'lama who is the whole government of the King'.

The Desi office, it appears, was created as a subsidiary to the post of Zhapdrung in running the secular affairs of the state just as the office of the Jé Khenpo was a subsidiary to run the ecclesiastical duties of the Zhapdrung. The Desi was responsible, under the supreme leadership of the Zhapdrung, to run the state administration, collect taxes and plan military defense and offences. However, this changed after Bhutan failed to have a hereditary rule under Zhapdrung's family line; the full secular power to rule over the country fell in the hands of the Desi. The power could have fully reverted to the Zhapdrung figure after the appearance of the reincarnation of Zhapdrung but multiple candidates claiming to be Zhapdrung's reincarnation led to serious division in the political rule, and the valiant and power-hungry persons who fought their way to become Desi wrested the full political power from the Zhapdrung institution. Thus, since the middle of the 17th century until the introduction of the Wangchuck dynasty, the Desi was the highest political office and they held the political reins.

The Desi was the chief ruler who led the medieval *lhengyé* of the cabinet of ministers and governors. The British referred to the Desi as Deb Raja in distinction to the Dharmaraja or the Zhapdrung incarnate who held the princely regency. Although the Dharmaraja was the nominal head of the state, the candidate was often appointed by the Desi, who made all major political and military decisions. The incumbent and retired Desis were entitled to benefit from the state as well as offerings and fees from the citizens for judicial work.

From 1651 until the beginning of the twentieth century, Bhutanese saw some fifty-seven Desis come to power. Some individuals such as Chökyi Gyaltsen served as Desi twice and during some periods two Desis amicably shared power. At one stage, the political rule over Bhutan was divided into two camps in Thimphu and Punakha with two Desis ruling simultaneously from two different capitals. One historian even counted the first and second Druk Gyalpos as Desis. These have led to difference among scholars in their enumeration of Desis. Many Desis were killed by their opponents in office or ousted from their office but many of them also voluntarily stood down from the post. A few times, the Zhapdrung incarnation who held the regency also held the post of the Desi. The first seven Desis were all monks and most Desis in the early part of Bhutan's history as unified state are monastics although powerful lay officials dominated the post of Desi in the nineteenth century. However, the last Desi, Yeshe Ngödup was both a monastic who served as the Jé Khenpo and also a Zhapdrung incarnation who held the golden throne of prince-regent.

With the installation of Ugyen Wangchuck as the first hereditary king of Bhutan in 1907, the Desi post was generally subsumed by the monarchy although there was no clear cut understanding at that time about the roles of the monarch and the Desi. The British official Charles Bell met Yeshe Ngödup on his way to ask the king to make him Desi again. The two first kings also continued to use the title and seals of Trongsa pönlop or governor of Trongsa rather than use the title of the king. However, in the first half of the twentieth century, it became very clear that the monarchy subsumed both the post of the prince-regent and the Desi as the political head of the state. The Desi office today is an institution of the past but having been ruled by Desis for two and half centuries, Bhutan continues to experience its impact through the lasting legacies of courtly etiquette, language, and culture of governance.

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