

State of Democracy in South Asia: Sri Lanka

SDSA Team

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Recommendations:

- Inclusive nationalism must be cultivated, while Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarianism must be handled appropriately.
- Militarization of the state must be addressed urgently.
- Federal arrangements can potentially improve power sharing and satisfy ethnic aspirations.
- Devolution of power and redefinition of central national authority need to be on the agenda.
- Presidentialism and proportional representation should be re-examined.

Key Findings

Aspiration for democracy

Sri Lanka does not fit the trend of global democratic triumph; democracy has neither been fully consolidated, nor does it have the economic conditions that are expected to give solid foundations to democracy being achieved. Nevertheless, democracy has widespread support: 92% of the citizens of Sri Lanka consider that democracy is suitable for their country. The data also indicates that Sri Lanka, along with India, show the strongest levels of support for democracy in South Asia. However, there is a favourable view of strong personal leadership and rule by experts.

Meanings of Democracy

The study found that there is no single South Asian meaning of democracy; each country, region and group holds a different conception and idea of what democracy means. However, the survey indicates that a positive notion of freedom, which extends to freedom from want and need, is recognized by the majority of the respondents as a crucial attribute. Nevertheless, only 47% of the respondents in South Asia are able to offer some meaning of their own for the word “democracy”. This proportion is higher in Sri Lanka, at 57%.

From Promise to Design

Constitutional arrangements in South Asia do not seem to translate completely the radical promises of democracy into its institutions. While, the constitution of Sri Lanka includes special provisions to protect and safeguard religious minorities; the enforcement is not at all secured and provisions allowing a state religion run counter to norms forbidding discrimination on the basis of faith. The

judiciary has also taken over certain functions that do not meet Western standards, such as the political function of making or breaking a government by deliberating on the legality of dissolving elected assemblies or the dismissal of elected governments. Nevertheless, in Sri Lanka, the executive exerts pressure on the judiciary through the extension of the tenure of judges. The conduct of free and fair elections has also been somewhat complicated; in Sri Lanka, the electoral commission has not been able to fully demonstrate independence as it is appointed at the discretion of the President.

Institutions and People

In Sri Lanka, more people tend to have confidence in institutions than those who distrust them. However, non-elected institutions that do not seek renewed mandates seem to be trusted more. Levels of trust seem to depend more on locality, education and media exposure, and less on gender. On the other hand, the assessment shows that trust in institutions is less dependent on cultural traits in the population, and more on political experience and social position. In Sri Lanka, the ethnic divide is crucial: Tamils in general show low levels of trust. The rise of a majoritarian ethnic and the last 25 years of violent strife are crucial to understanding this situation.

Dealing with Diversity

While different religious communities and faiths have lived together for a long time in the region, South Asia also has a history of contest and conflict for political power between these communities. The function of the market and the different shares in the benefits derived from development compound ethnic and regional differences, while issues of language, autonomy and revenue sharing are matters of intense contest and struggle. All this gives room for political negotiations to reshape states. These tensions trouble Sri Lanka, where the preference for Sinhala language alienated the Tamil people further by the refusal to devolve power and resources to the latter. However, there is an increasing acceptance of federal norms and development of innovative mechanisms for settling the contested claims between the union and the regional units. In this sense, the elite and political establishment favour a negotiated agreement with the Tamils.

Party Political Competition

In South Asia, political parties initially took shape as movements and vehicles for mass mobilization, articulating democratic aspirations of the people and shaping nationalist consciousness. Although major political parties and labels have survived, the structure of competition has changed dramatically. Sri Lanka is the only country in the region that does not have a First-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system; a system that is supposed to keep the number of significant political parties close to two. However, despite the presence of about 50 political parties in Sri Lanka, the effective number of parties is less than three. Nevertheless, due to the inability of the major parties to win the confidence of Tamil population in Sri Lanka, a virtually parallel party system has emerged in the Tamil speaking areas of the country. Therefore, it is not possible to treat the country's electoral system as a two-party or bipolar system.

Beyond Parties and Elections

Sri Lanka has the highest proportion (22%) of trade union membership in the region. The country also shows above average participation in Women's organizations, with 31% of the women surveyed reporting their participation in such organizations. Besides liberation and democratic social movements, popular movements based on religious issues also seem to be gaining strength throughout the country. According to the surveys, 33% of the population in South Asia participates in religious organizations. This proportion doubles in Sri Lanka, with 60% of the respondents reporting participation in such organizations. In addition, Sri Lanka has experienced armed insurgency; an extreme manifestation of popular mobilization that reflects the dead-end of democratic politics.

Freedom from Fear

Compared to the regional average, Sri Lanka has a high proportion, 14%, of respondents that say that they, their family members or acquaintances faced physical assault in the last year. However, when asked how secure people felt in comparison to previous years, Sri Lanka was very close to the regional average with 36% saying that they felt more secure. The armed and security forces in the region are a source of concern as charges of excessive violence and violations of human rights, non-responsive and undemocratic behaviour are often publicized. In general in the region, the police forces have low credibility levels: 65% of the population would approach the police if they had a problem. In Sri Lanka, on the other hand, the population shows a high level of confidence in the police force; with 82% of the population being willing to approach the police in case of need.

Freedom from Want

South Asia is still very far away from achieving freedom from want. Per capita income in the region is less than half the global average, and still below the average for developing countries. While Sri Lanka is the best performer in the region, its poverty levels have actually increased. In addition, just like in the rest of the region, the proportion of people in Sri Lanka who thought their income did not cover their needs was higher than the official figure of people living below the line of poverty. In Sri Lanka, 65% of the population considers that their income does not meet their needs.

Political Outcomes

There exists a widespread acceptance of democratic procedures in the region, making democracy the only legitimate game that everyone aspires to. One of the most significant transformations related to achieving a culture of democracy has to do with people moving away from being subjects to becoming citizens. One such aspect is that the right to vote is not only taken seriously, but also the effectiveness of the vote itself. The survey shows that 65% of Sri Lankans consider that their vote makes a difference. However, the majority of the population in Sri Lanka demonstrated dissatisfaction with democracy, with complaints about democracy strongly related to the lack of basic living standards (17% of the population), and the lack of equal rights (12%).

Why perform an assessment?

This executive summary is the result of a major assessment project launched by Lokniti-Programme

for Comparative Democracy at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, International IDEA and the Department of sociology of Oxford University in five South Asian countries: Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. All these countries have experienced profound transformations during the last 50 years, and none complies with conventional, Western notions of democracy. In this sense, a major goal of the assessment was to understand not only what democracy has done to South Asia, but also what South Asia has done to democracy.

Assessment Approach

Inspired by the International IDEA Assessment Framework, the South Asia State of Democracy research team developed another framework (http://www.democracy-asia.org/qa_grid.htm) divided into four areas: the economic, social and cultural domain; the state institutional domain; the party political domain; and the non-party political domain. The assessment was then conducted in the 5 countries and the methodology used included cross-section surveys, dialogues with political activists, case studies, and qualitative assessments.

This executive summary was prepared by International IDEA. Views expressed in this summary do not necessarily represent the views of International IDEA, its Board or its Council of Member States, or the local State of Democracy assessment team.