State of Democracy in South Asia: Bangladesh

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When separating from Pakistan, the forces of nationalism in Bangladesh strived for a secular democratic society, diversity and representation. When the democratic foundations of Bangla nationalism were jeopardised by leaders accruing authority to themselves and by military interventions, the people reasserted themselves and brought democracy back. The State of Democracy in South Asia project looks at Bangladesh and evaluates the consolidation of democracy and power of the people.

Key Recommendations:

- The armed forces must be de-politicized and made accountable.
- The secular fabric of society should be protected, limiting the role of religious and fundamentalist forces and protecting minorities.
- Political competition must be institutionalized and disruptions limited.
- The establishment of an *Ombudsman* and de-politicization of the judiciary are necessary.
- Electoral reforms and the strengthening of the Electoral Commission are crucial to enhancing political structures.

Key Findings

Aspiration for democracy

Bangladesh does not fit the trend of global democratic triumph: democracy has neither been fully consolidated, nor have the economic conditions that are expected to give solid foundations to democracy being achieved. Nevertheless, democracy has widespread support: 93% of the citizens of Bangladesh consider that democracy is suitable for their country. However, the assessment also indicates that in Bangladesh, almost 60% of the population supports army rule. In addition, in the region religion shows up in the surveys as a major factor: 40% of the surveyed population in South Asia agreed that religious leaders, rather than politicians, should be empowered to make decisions. This trend is stronger in Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Meanings of Democracy

The study found that there is no single South Asian meaning of democracy. Each country, region

and group shares a different conception 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 of democracy. That explains why the capacity to provide for basic necessities is the most essential attribute of democracy according to 52% of the respondents in Bangladesh, followed by the existence of equal rights, chosen by 31% of the surveyed population. In all of South Asia, this trend is stronger amongst non-elites, while elites stress equal rights and the power to change governments.

From Promise to Design

While the constitution of Bangladesh includes special provisions to protect and safeguard religious minorities, "emergency" provisions allow the government to suspend civil and political rights and the marginalization of political opposition. The Bangladesh constitution also establishes civil control of the armed forces but nevertheless, the armed forces have taken over the government for varying lengths of time. Other than the establishment of caretaker government provisions that avoid incumbents to enjoy unfair election advantages, mechanisms for public and administrative accountability remain weak or are virtually non-existent. Together with the lack of watchdog organizations, *ombudsman* offices and other corrective mechanisms, instances of corruption even involving senior political officers have become common. Corruption reaches both the judiciary and the military.

Institutions and People

In Bangladesh, more people tend to have confidence in institutions than those who distrust them. In general, non-elected institutions that do not seek renewed mandates seem to be trusted more. In this sense, the armed forces enjoy very high levels of trust; the same is found with the courts and Electoral Commissions. In Bangladesh, levels of confidence are higher than in the other countries of the region; the civil service is well regarded with 80% of respondents trusting this institution. However, minorities and underprivileged sectors tend to show less trust towards institutions.

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 between these communities for political power. There have been attempts at political re-organization along ethnic lines, with the creation of Bangladesh being the most conspicuous example. Despite being part of a Muslim nation, the residents of East Pakistan put more emphasis on their linguistic commonality and seceded from Pakistan to create what is arguably the most ethnically homogenous country in the region today. However, contrary to hopes that this would lead to a more accommodative government without ethnic discrimination, the present-day experience of minorities like Hindu and Chakma- Buddhist proves otherwise.

Party Political Competition

Political parties in South Asia are the principal force around which public debate is organized, structuring political alternatives, formulating policies and translating them into an intelligible set of

choices. The large space occupied by political parties can be explained by a number of reasons: the lack of institutionalization, solid ideology and policy agenda which allows political parties in the region to organise resistance and lead struggles. In addition, many parties are becoming more identified with a single personality and are unable to develop internal mechanisms for leadership renewal. Parties that become autocratic and centralized organizations and powerful political dynasties are able to develop both at the national and regional levels. In Bangladesh, two of the most famous examples are the Mujib-ur Rahman and Zia-ur Rahman.

Beyond Parties and Elections

In Bangladesh, 27% of the respondents declare their participation in NGO activities, more than double the South Asian average (11%), and NGOs play a very important role in policy implementation. However, there is a strong ongoing debate on the efficacy of the voluntary sector and its contribution to the enlargement and deepening of democracy. Despite the articulation of new issues not foreseen by political parties and state agencies, critics remain sceptical about the nature of claims, the non-representative, unaccountable and undemocratic nature of many organizations, their links with donor agencies and their capacity to disrupt national agendas and policies. In Bangladesh, NGOs appear to displace the state in terms of policy making and implementation.

Freedom from Fear

The armed and security forces in the region, although engaged in anti-insurgency activities crucial for the continuity of national states, are also a source of concern, as charges of excessive violence and violations of human rights, non-responsive and undemocratic behaviour are often publicized. In this sense, the surveys indicate that popular experience and interaction with the armed forces, although frequently helpful according to 46% of the population in South Asia, has also been one of harassment or assault for 17% of the region. In Bangladesh, however, levels of confidence in police forces are higher, 79% of the population is willing to approach them in case of trouble.

Freedom from Want

According to UNDP Human Development Reports, South Asia is still very far from freedom from want. Per capita income in the region is less than half the global average and below the global average for developing countries. In Bangladesh the income per capita is 4 times lower than the global average. However; the Bangladesh Human Development Report indicates improvements with regards to human development with a decline of mortality and fertility rates and an increase in adult literacy. While the importance of per capita income growth should not be de-emphasized, this validates that rapid economic growth is a means for achieving higher social goals and not an end in itself.

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 66% of the population in Bangladesh consider

that their vote makes a difference, and the record of satisfaction with democracy is stronger in India and Bangladesh than in the rest of the region.

Why perform an assessment?

This executive summary is the result of a major assessment project launched by Lokniti Programme for Comparative Democracy, 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.