# Summary

# State of Democracy in South Asia: Bangladesh

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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.

## The Assessment

### *Aspiration for democracy*

South Asia does not totally 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 been achieved. Nevertheless, democracy has widespread support: 88% of the citizens surveyed from the five South Asian countries consider that democracy is suitable for their country. In Bangladesh, this proportion amounts to 93%.

The survey also indicates that both in Bangladesh and Pakistan, almost 60% of the population supports army rule. There exists a correlation between lower levels of education and higher support for army rule.

Religion shows up in the survey 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. Yet, this preference does not cut across religious lines, and differs from country to country: while Muslims in Pakistan are the least supportive of democracy, Muslims in Sri Lanka are the most supportive, and Hindus in India, Nepal and Pakistan show stark differences in their levels of support for democracy as well.

On a regional level, 26% of the respondents identified themselves as "strong democrats", and 22% as "non-democrats". Nevertheless, the sum of "strong" and "weak" democrats in the five countries outnumbers "non-democrats". Bangladesh and Nepal show a balance between strong democrats and non-democrats.

The assessment shows that support for democracy varies across social groups: elites show stronger support for democracy than the masses; higher income respondents support democracy more than lower income respondents; men, particularly in Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan, support democracy more than women; and urban dwellers – specially in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, but not in India nor Nepal – show stronger levels of support for democracy than rural dwellers.

The combination of formal education, media exposure and informal political education accounts for much of the differences in support for democracy in the South Asian region.

### *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 and idea of what democracy means, shaped by their own culture, their colonial and/or national histories, and present day politics. On the other hand, the region has also imprinted its own understandings on the notion of democracy. Thus, instead of the Western notion that puts a premium on popular control over rulers, equal rights and liberties for citizens, the rule of law and protection against tyranny, democracy in South Asia is associated principally with the ideas of people's rule, political freedom, equality of outcomes and community rights.

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. That explains why the capacity to provide for basic necessities is the most essential attribute of democracy according to 39% of the respondents, followed by the existence of equal rights, chosen by 37% of the surveyed population. This tendency is even more accentuated in Bangladesh, were 52% of the population surveyed stressed the importance of basic necessities as an essential attribute of democracy, followed

by 31% who favoured equal rights. In all of South Asia, this trend is stronger amongst non-elites, while elites stress equal rights and the power to change governments.

The language of rights in popular discourse has shifted from the individual level to that of the community. The assessment team considers that the introduction of modern politics provided the basis for the creation of some of these communities. This situation provided an opportunity for struggle by marginal social groups while creating space for majoritarian interpretations of democracy: almost two-thirds of the surveyed population agrees that the will of the majority community should prevail in a democracy. However, majoritarianism is still not the dominant trend in the region and respect for minority concerns and rights is prominent, especially in Nepal, but also in India and Bangladesh.

Democracy as a form of government appears to occupy a secondary meaning in popular imagination. Here, the idea of popular control of government takes precedence over other institutional mechanisms, even over the notion of rule of law.

Although South Asians attribute several characteristics to democracy (mentioned above), the survey indicates that a little less than half of the respondents are able to offer some meaning of their own for the word "democracy". The assessment team considers that this is due to socio-economic factors and the individual levels of social articulation, and is directly related to the degree of formal education and media exposure. Gender (in) equality reinforces such tendencies. 51% of Bangladeshi respondents relate to democracy at some articulate level, while the South Asian average is 47%.

### *From Promise to Design*

Constitutional arrangements in South Asia do not seem to translate completely the radical promises of democracy into its institutions. These constitutions did not fully break with their pre-democratic pasts for several reasons.

- In India, which also came to visibly influence Bangladesh, colonial and modern institutions of governance were used to cope with the power of the traditional social norms and structures that threatened to block the expansion of democracy.
- The colonial and monarchical (in the case of Nepal) arrangements were used as effective instruments of regulation to preserve the new state.
- Finally, the institutions were also seen by the elites as assurance of counter-balancing the masses.

In general, South Asian constitutions provide a wide range of civil and political rights, and deploy several institutions to safeguard the rights of underprivileged and minority groups. The constitutions of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka include special provisions to protect and safeguard religious minorities, while the Nepalese constitution does not recognize minorities at all. In spite of the above-mentioned legal provisions, enforcement is not at all secure. "Emergency" provisions, legal clauses allowing governments to suspend civil and political rights and the marginalization of political opposition, all based on the ideas of order and consolidation of the state apparatus, impair the enforcement of rights. Provisions allowing state religion – Islam in Bangladesh and Pakistan, Buddhism in Sri Lanka, and (until recently) Hinduism in Nepal – run counter to those norms forbidding discrimination on the basis of faith. The impact of British parliamentary traditions in the region is very strong, and inspired the design of constitutions: interdependent but autonomous legislatures and executives, independent judiciary and civilian supremacy. However, following a global trend, executive organs in the region have taken over important law and policy-making functions previously held by legislatures. The judiciary, particularly the higher courts, 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 at the federal or provincial levels. Nevertheless, the executive exerts pressure on the judiciary through making appointments, transfers, promotions, retirement or, in the cases of Sri Lanka and Pakistan, the extension of the tenure of judges.

Civilian control of the armed forces is established by the respective constitutions of each country. Nevertheless, this is effective only in India and Sri Lanka, while in Bangladesh the armed forces have taken over the government for varying lengths of time, rendering non-functional all provisions on electoral democracy.

As for electoral systems, the first-past-the-post system (FPTP) is the most common in the region, as in the case of Bangladesh. Proportional representation (PR) has also been adopted on a limited scale in India, Pakistan and Nepal, while Sri Lanka adopted it more extensively since 1978. However, the expected effects on the party system have not quite happened: while the FPTP design has produced multi-party competition in India, the introduction of PR in Sri Lanka has not been able to change the bipolar competition developed with the previous FPTP system.

The conduct of free and fair elections has been a more complicated issue in the region, though Bangladesh and India have set a better record than other countries. Bangladesh, in particular, has established caretaker government provisions that avoid incumbent governments enjoying unfair advantages. In spite of this, several instances of malpractice and electoral violence have been reported in all these countries.

Mechanisms for public and administrative accountability remain weak or virtually non-existent in South Asia. Together with the lack of watchdog organizations, *ombudsman* offices and other corrective mechanisms, instances of graft and corruption even involving senior political officers have become common. Corruption reaches both the judiciary and the military.

The establishment of a one-party state in 1975 in Bangladesh, allowing the suspension of freedom of expression, restrictions to judicial autonomy and the institution of the presidential form of government reinforced by further amendments in 1979, is an example of constitutional deviation in the region.

Finally, in 2006 the press in Bangladesh was considered "not-free".

### *Institutions and People*

South Asians appear to trust their democratic institutions much like the rest of the world. In all five countries, more people tend to have confidence in institutions than those who distrust them. In Bangladesh, it is more about investing hope in political institutions, probably related to a long tradition of democratic struggle. Interestingly, the most visible institutions across the region (the Parliament, political parties, police and civil service) generally score lower levels of trust.

In general, non-elected institutions that do not seek renewed mandates seem to be trusted more. In this sense, the armed forces in the region enjoy very high levels of trust; the same is found - Pakistan being the exception - with the courts and Electoral Commissions. These levels of trust do not apply, however, to the police or the civil service: those institutions that have stronger interface with the public seem to score lower than those which are more distant. In the case of Bangladesh, levels of confidence are higher than in the other countries of the region: while 60 % of respondents have little trust in the police (the least trusted institution), the civil service is well regarded with 80% of respondents trusting this institution.

Levels of trust seem to depend more on locality, education and media exposure, and less on gender: urbanites, graduates and people with higher levels of media exposure show less trust towards institutions than rural dwellers, non-literate and people with no exposure to media. On the other hand, the assessment shows that trust in institutions is less dependent on cultural traits of the population, and more on political experience and social position. In Bangladesh, minorities and underprivileged sectors tend to show less trust towards institutions. For example, the Garos and Bihari Muslim minorities tend to exhibit a low level of trust compared to the majority Bengali-

Muslim community.

According to the researchers, one of the main reasons for the low levels of trust in parties and parliaments could be that they are not representative: besides appearing to be elite-captured institutions, there appears to be a lack of representation from all sectors in society. However, in Bangladesh seats are reserved for women in the national legislature.

***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. These identities and differences became more assertive as a consequence of colonial policies. These tensions have been built into the nature of nationalism in the region.

On the other hand the accommodation of different national projects has been sought as part of the democratic effort. However, state building has led to the suppression of cultural differences. Institutional designs throughout the region reflect this by dealing with issues of diversity through strategies which include the non-recognition of diversity, de-legitimization, assimilation, accommodation, and the redefinition of the nature of diversity itself.

The specific mix of politics and institutions has resulted in two contradictory tendencies: on the one hand, the region appears to be gradually moving towards accepting minimum thresholds of legitimate diversity in the public realm; on the other, popular response to assertions of minority identities seems to lead towards majoritarian behaviour.

National pride is pervasive: 98% of the region's population is proud of its nationality. The feeling is more intense in Pakistan. At the same time, the sense of pride in regional or ethnic identity is very strong as well, particularly in Pakistan. Moreover, both forms of identification are similar in quantitative terms. The function of the market and the different share 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. In Pakistan, the establishment of Urdu as the main language added to the alienation of the Bangla in former East Pakistan, leading to the creation of Bangladesh.

However, there is an increasing acceptance of federal norms and the development of innovative mechanisms for settling the contested claims between the union and the regional units. In this sense, Bangladesh has moved towards a negotiated settlement on the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

The challenges posed by social diversity and the overlapping social diversities -religion, sect, ethnicity, language and caste- are more complex. The definition itself of "majority" and "minority" is complicated as their boundaries are fuzzy: the languages of majorities and minorities have not become common; communities are not cohesive homogeneous entities; and in most cases there are no fixed majorities or minorities. Notwithstanding this complexity, there have been attempts at political re-organization along ethnical 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 succeeded 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 ethnical discrimination, the present-day experience of minorities like Hindu and Chakma- Buddhist proves otherwise..

According to the survey, nearly half the respondents could not offer any response to whether they thought of themselves as majority or minority. There was a significant mismatch between the official status of the religion of the respondents and their self-recognition as majority or minority:

- Two out of five respondents understood the language of minority/majority and identified themselves in line with the majority/minority status of their religion.
- One-sixth of the majority Muslim community in Bangladesh and Pakistan recognized

themselves as a minority.

The researchers consider the issue of religious minority rights to pose the biggest challenge to South Asian states. Four out of five states prioritise a particular religion - Islam in Pakistan and Bangladesh, Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Hinduism in Nepal - despite formal commitments to fair treatment of all religious communities. This duality provides a source of confusion in policy responses.

In general, state responses to issues of social diversity, particularly regarding religious minorities, revolve around three models. The first involves successful democratic accommodation of minority needs and demands, and is championed by India, and to a lesser degree Nepal.

A second model is that of non-accommodation or suppression of minority claims based on arguments of "order", "national interest", "unity" and "majority will". In general, these tactics have led to situations of separation and civil war, as the one that led Banglas in former East Pakistan to create Bangladesh.

The third, and dominant model, is that of majoritarianism. This response appears to be linked to the support for democracy, understood as the legitimate rule of the majority over minorities; and the nature of nationalism in the region, built on anti-colonial struggles and the politicization of communities. According to the survey, this means that:

- Although there is little opposition to equal treatment of majorities and minorities, there is scant support for special protective measures for minorities.
- About 25% of the population agree that minorities should adopt the ways of the majority community.
- Respect for minority concerns and rights are more pronounced in Bangladesh and India, while the proportion of majoritarians in Sri Lanka and Pakistan exceed those who take a pro-diversity position.
- Support for majoritarian or pro-diversity positions depends more on the national context than on religion: Muslims in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India tend to be strongly pro-diversity, while Pakistani Muslims tend to be majoritarian.

### *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.

Parties initially took shape as movements and vehicles for mass mobilisation, articulating democratic aspirations of the people and shaping nationalist consciousness: the Awami League in Bangladesh, the Congress Party in India, the Ceylon Workers Congress in Sri Lanka, the Muslim League in Pakistan and the Nepali Congress, all functioned both as movements and political parties.

After independence, all of them assumed central roles in designing and managing institutions of representation and governance. Thus, political parties in the region have to deal with roles that are performed by other democratic institutions elsewhere. Moreover, ethnic, class, linguistic and religious divisions and extreme disparities between individuals and groups add to this situation. Political parties end up reflecting all of these issues and acquire coalitional characteristics. Finally, the history of each country influences the nature of political parties.

Party political competition in South Asia has been very unstable over the last few decades and party systems have undergone major changes. Although major political parties and labels have survived, the structure of competition has changed dramatically:

- Some founding parties met with their demise, creating political vacuums into which new parties could enter. This is the case of the Muslim League in Pakistan, which effectively destroyed itself soon after independence.
- Splits in major parties have allowed the development of new political actors. In Bangladesh, the Jatiya party has split three times in a decade. The Pakistan Muslim League and the Pakistan People's Party have seen many divisions. Both the Nepali Congress and the RPP have separated several times. For decades, the opposition in India came from splits within the Congress Party. Most of these were caused by leadership clashes.
- Regime-fostered parties, forged by non-democratic regimes which survived in the arena of political competition include the Bangladesh Nationalist Party formed by Zia-ur Rahman, the Pakistan Muslim League formed by Ayub Khan, and the Jatiya Party set up by General Ershad.
- Ethnic and regional pulls have often resulted in the formation of new parties. The inability of the two major parties to win the confidence of the Tamil population in Sri Lanka, led to the emergence of a parallel party system in the Tamil speaking areas. The Nepal Sadbhavna Party seeks to represent the cause of the Madhesi population while the Janmukti parties articulate the indigenous peoples of Nepal. India has witnessed the rise of many caste- or regional-based parties like the BSP (Dalits), TDP (Andhra Pradesh), the AGP (Ahomiya minority in Assam) or parties with national nomenclature based in one state (Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh, AIADMK in Tamil Nadu).

Political party fragmentation has led to a multiplication of parties contesting elections and attaining representation in national assemblies, despite the first-past-the-post electoral systems operating throughout most of the region. To control this situation, each country has established high entry barriers to electoral representation, which act as a deterrent for new and small political formations: however, the number of political parties has not diminished. In this sense, Bangladesh is the closest to a two-party system in the region, with less than three effective political parties.

Larger numbers of political parties seem to draw citizens closer to political activity. According to the assessment surveys, 16% of the population reported taking part in political party activities, surpassing levels of participation in sport clubs (15%), cultural organizations (13%), trade unions and NGOs (11% each), and second only to those held by religious organizations (33%). Moreover, the levels of identification with any political party are relatively high: 43% of the region's population identify themselves with a political party, while this proportion is higher in Bangladesh (57%).

The demise of one-party dominance has led to coalition politics and the need to secure support from smaller parties. Moreover, all political parties in the region face two challenges dealing with social diversity. First, diversity and public expectations in each country result in competitive politics sharpening differences and running against unified notions of common citizenry. Second, weakness in party organizations reduces the ability to address broader political concerns, leading to parties becoming narrow interest organizations.

South Asia appears to have entered a phase of political ethnicization, where each party claims sectional support but needs to build coalitions in order to effectively achieve representation. Although polarising the system, this tendency has also led to increased identification with political parties and improved mechanisms for reconciling competing claims of different social constituencies.

Despite all this, dissatisfaction with political parties, both as vehicles for representation and agencies for governance, has increased. This fluid and unstructured nature of party political space has meant increased citizen involvement, but also vulnerability of parties to determined intervention of vested social interests, national and global capital and organised crime. Thus, criminality and corruption amongst party leaders has become more common, parties are becoming more identified with a single personality and are unable to develop internal mechanisms for leadership renewal and the renewal of senior office holders. Parties that become autocratic and centralized organizations or powerful political dynasties are able to develop both at the national and regional levels. Some of the

most famous examples are the followers of Mujib-ur Rahman and Zia-ur Rahman in Bangladesh, the Nehru family in India, the Bandaranaikes in Sri Lanka, and the Bhuttos in Pakistan.

Nevertheless, political parties contribute to the expansion of participation in South Asia. Elections show a fair turnout, with large numbers of poor, under-privileged and marginalized people participating. Almost 90% of the survey respondents in the region have voted at least once. However, women are marginalized from all forms of political action, and participate at half the level of their fellow male citizens.

### *Beyond Parties and Elections*

Traditionally, South Asian societies have had a very rich life of associations. In addition, the anti-colonial and anti-monarchical struggles during the early 20th century drew groups and individuals towards political parties, crystallising participation and mobilization this way from then onwards. However, dissatisfaction and alienation produced by different experiences of democratic politics and state policy led to seeking alternative and parallel forms and strategies to gain a voice in the system, enhance participation in decision-making, and re-orient state policy to accommodate new concerns.

While participation in voluntary activism is relatively widespread, the survey shows that it is easier for elites to afford and participate in voluntary organizations. Higher levels of media exposure are related to higher levels of voluntary activism.

The assessment shows that the proportion of reported membership in trade unions is far lower than what could be expected. At the regional level, 11% of the respondents report being members of a trade union, while it reaches 10% in Bangladesh.

Trade union membership is less extensive amongst poorer workers. This limited engagement may be caused in part because unions find it easier to work with the organized sector of workforce, in spite of the fact that more than 90% of the workforce in the region is unorganized: farming and allied activities, services and trade. This labour structure results in the loosening of labour regulations.
Compared to the levels of trade union participation, double the number of people engaged in protests, demonstrations and related activities. In general, 19% of the respondents indicate they have participated in protests, struggles or movements. This proportion is the highest in Bangladesh, where 43% of the respondents declare their participation in demonstrations.

A substantial number of people participate in other non-party and non-political forums, ranging from religious and cultural organizations to NGOs. The latter have become very important in the region, particularly in Bangladesh, where 27% of the respondents participate in NGO activities.
The researchers found that party and non-party organizations actually overlap. The relationship between protest activity and party identification is even stronger: 66% in Bangladesh identify themselves with a political party. Large numbers of protesters also identify themselves as campaigners, the highest being 88% in Bangladesh.

Besides liberation and democratic social movements, popular movements based on religious issues also seem to be gaining strength throughout the region. According to the surveys, 33% of the population in South Asia participates in a religious movement, while this proportion rests at 30% in Bangladesh.

It has to be noted that, despite the proven potential to mobilize large numbers of people and alter the fragile relationship between religion and secular politics (for instance, the Majils, Jammat-e-Islami or the Tabligh in Bangladesh and Pakistan; the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal in India; the Buddhist clergy and organisations in Sri Lanka), the directly confessional parties have rarely managed to secure a popular mandate. However, these religious movements, rather than deepening democracy, have significantly contributed to the majoritarian tendencies in the region.
Armed insurgency is an extreme manifestation of popular mobilization and has been experienced by

all countries in South Asia. Whether as expressions of nationalism, struggles for autonomous realization of cultural identity, or as a challenge to the discriminatory and exclusionary process of growth and development, insurgency reflects the dead-end of democratic politics - the inability of states and regimes to accommodate urges of disaffected peoples. For instance, the Chakma ethnic minority in Bangladesh has been forced to armed struggle.
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 the case of Bangladesh, NGOs appeared to displace the state in terms of policy making and implementation.

***Freedom from Fear***

The assessment team approached the question of human security by shifting the issue from expert-based perceptions and traditional strategic views of security towards a commonsense view of the people.

The survey indicates that there is a high level of experience of physical insecurity. In this sense, 9% of respondents in the region say that they, their family members or acquaintances faced physical assault in the last year. This proportion is higher in Bangladesh (10%).

However, these experiences of insecurity do not translate into perceptions of insecurity: only 6% of the population across the region feels unsafe, while more than 70% feel safe in their own dwellings. This perception of safety reaches 68% of the respondents in Bangladesh, and is strongest in India (76%) and Sri Lanka (72%), and lowest in Nepal (54%). The feeling of insecurity in the latter country is related to a lack of trust in the national government and the police force before the King assumed executive powers in early 2005.

The relative sense of security was also gauged in the survey by asking how secure people felt in comparison to previous years. The image remains positive in general, and 37% of South Asia's population feels more secure than in the past; this proportion is the same in Bangladesh.

Women are seen, both by men and women, as less secure. One out of six respondents considers that it is unsafe for women to go out after sunset: this rate is three times higher than the general level of insecurity in South Asia. In Bangladesh and Pakistan, more men than women consider it unsafe for the latter, while the opposite happens in India and Sri Lanka. In Bangladesh, India and Nepal, men were equally divided over women's safety in work, while in Pakistan the proportion of men that considers it unsafe doubles that of men who consider it safe for women at the workplace. More women in Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan thought it was unsafe, while in Sri Lanka the number of women who thought it was safe at work outnumbered those who thought it was unsafe.

The feeling of insecurity is higher among minorities in Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. However, minority status is compounded by other factors: objective material conditions, social tensions and levels of tolerance of diversity, official state policies towards minorities and marginal groups, and the levels of identity-based mobilization amongst the majorities.

According to the researchers, people's commonsense runs counter expert knowledge on security. The survey shows that the sources of insecurity are, in order of relevance, theft, assault, kidnap, riots, militancy, terrorism, war and armed force action. However, minority groups assign more relevance to the community violence, while people from specific regions are more concerned about issues of war and terrorism: the Sylhet region in Bangladesh; the northern areas of Sri Lanka; the Hindi heartlands in India, and the central Tarai in Nepal.

Media exposure plays a significant role in the increased concerns with war and terrorism. Political discourse and domestic politics also affect popular concerns on security. For example, the post 9/11 discourse in Pakistan influenced popular imagination and led to global terrorism and war becoming the second and third most important concerns, respectively. In India, militant and insurgent activities have become the third source of insecurity after constant public debates.

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 that had contact with these agencies, has also been one of harassment or assault for 17% of the region. This proportion is worse regarding interaction with the police: while 39% of the population who interacted with police forces considered them to be helpful, 21% reported instances of assault and harassment. The police forces in the region have low credibility levels: 65% of the population would approach the police if they had a problem, but only 37% expects equitable treatment. In Bangladesh, levels of confidence in police forces are higher, 79% of the population is willing to approach them in case of trouble.

***Freedom from Want***

In South Asia, the experiments of mass democracy are combined with a situation of mass poverty. These experiences can be crucial to answer two of the most complex questions of our times: first, is a certain degree of material prosperity a precondition to the growth and endurance of democracy? Second, is democracy a reliable instrument for achieving freedom of 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 and Nepal, 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.

Nearly 30% of the population lives below the poverty line, despite claims of sharp reductions of poverty levels in the region. the proportion of people living below the poverty line in Bangladesh fell from 59% to 50% between 1990 and 2000, while this proportion shrank during the same period from 39% to 26% in India. However, these proportions increased in Pakistan and Sri Lanka: while in 1990, the levels of people living below poverty were of 28% and 20% respectively, the proportions increased to 33% and 25% respectively. Paradoxically, all this has happened despite high levels of economic growth: while the world grew at an average rate of 2.6% during 1990-2003, South Asian economies expanded at rates of 5.2%.

The researchers argue that one reason why democracies may not address poverty is that the objective conditions of poverty are not reflected by the subjective perceptions of the people, including the poor themselves: poor people may not think of themselves as poor; and when that does happen, they might identify themselves with the aspirations of those above them, stifling demands for redistributive policies.

In the case of South Asia, the survey shows three kinds of mismatch. First, the proportion of people who thought their income did not cover their needs was higher than the official figure of people living below the line of poverty. Thus, 58% of the region's population considers that their income does not meet their needs, while this proportion reaches 51% in Bangladesh.

Second, the proportions run counter to the aggregate economic figures for each country. For instance, Bangladesh shows the highest proportion of people below poverty line and the lowest proportion of felt-poverty, as opposed to Sri Lanka, the country with highest income per capita in the region, which has the largest proportion of "subjectively" poor.

Third, there is a mismatch between where people like to place themselves and where people are placed in the economic hierarchy. There is a tendency towards downward identification in the region, and most people think and say they are poor. Respondents were asked to place themselves on a ten-step ladder: more than 60% placed themselves on the lowest three ranks, while barely 8% of all the respondents placed themselves anywhere in the upper half.

Despite the negative economic indicators, there is a relatively high level of satisfaction among the people with their present economic situation alongside expectations of a better future. According to the survey information, very few are dissatisfied with their economic conditions in Bangladesh: 54% of the respondents are satisfied or very satisfied, while 22% expressed dissatisfaction. Nobody responded that they were very dissatisfied. However, the better the objective conditions, the higher the level of satisfaction.

Beginning with Sri Lanka in the early 1980s, all the states in the region have moved away from state-led development strategies, embracing economic reforms and liberalization, privatisation and globalization. These reforms were not preceded by democratic debates and consensus building: these policy changes were achieved by decoupling the economic and the political, isolating some large public policy decisions from public scrutiny, or simply through double discourse.

However, some of these policies are not accepted by the public: 50% of the population rejects both privatisation and down-sizing of the government. Privatisation is least opposed in Bangladesh and most opposed in Sri Lanka and India. Nearly 60% of the population opposes the privatisation of public services, and this becomes more intense within less privileged groups such as the poor, non-literate and rural dwellers. In spite of this, the opposition to liberalization is much weaker when it does not touch public services or the government. Thus, with the exception of India and Sri Lanka, more people, particularly in Bangladesh and Pakistan, favour the entry of foreign capital than not. And redistributive policies, as putting ceilings on wealth and income, find more favour in Bangladesh and India, while strongly rejected in Sri Lanka.

### *Political Outcomes*

Democracy has produced a set of tangible outcomes: institutions, procedures and a web of laws and rules. In this sense, there exists a widespread acceptance of democratic procedures in the region, making democracy the only legitimate game that everyone aspires to.

However, there is also a set of intangible democratic goods that becomes crucial: public legitimating of shared values, adherence to norms of accountability by increasing people's confidence in them, in their power to mould their life chances and in their perceptions of the validity of democratic procedures. This is what can be called the "culture of democracy" in South Asia.

One of the most significant transformations related to this culture of democracy has to do with the people moving from being subjects to becoming citizens: the right to vote is not only taken seriously, but also the effectiveness of the vote itself. In this sense, the survey shows that 65% of South Asians consider that their vote makes a difference, while in Bangladesh this proportion reaches 66%.

More than 60% of the respondents in the region consider that elections are held with relative fairness. In Bangladesh, more than 80% of the respondents consider elections are relatively fair.
In relation to levels of public satisfaction with democratic functioning, people in the region are split between full satisfaction and full dissatisfaction with democracy: however, except in Bangladesh and India, the majorities in the other three countries are not fully satisfied with democracy.

It would appear that the workings of democracy have not produced greater attachments to the idea of minority protection: the socio-geographical criss-crossing of identities, which makes everyone a part of a contextual majority and/or minority, results in lower significance attached to democracy in terms of minority protection. The researchers indicate that democracies are becoming majoritarian in more than one sense: apart from the social atmosphere becoming less supportive of minorities and the episodic eruptions of violence between majority and minority communities, the growing invisibility of minorities in public life is a major area of concern.

Another issue is that of national versus regional or provincial identity. Despite the central pressures for a national identity, competitive politics sustains and fosters more localised identities. Thus, the survey indicated that despite a strong sentiment of nationalism in South Asia found in 53% of respondents, there is also a strong regionalism, represented by 23% of the respondents. The researchers deduce that it is possible people do not want to make clear-cut choices between the national and the regional, as they are proud of both their identities. The wider number of nationalists must be noted in order to explain South Asian politics. Identity-based conflicts in recent decades have moulded state formation and governance throughout South Asia.

***Links***

Democracy Asia Website - http://www.democracy-asia.org/index.htm
Centre for the Study of Developing Societies - http://www.csds.in

***Origins: Why perform a SoD assessment?***

This report is the result of a major assessment project launched by Lokniti, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 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 is to understand not only what democracy has done to South Asia, but also what South Asia has done to democracy.

***The Assessment Structure***

Inspired by the International IDEA Assessment Framework, the South Asia State of Democracy research team developed another framework divided in four areas: the economic, social and cultural domain; the state institutional domain; the party political domain, and the non-party political domain. This structure, in turn, gave rise to the ten areas into which the report is divided.

***Partners and Form***

This comprehensive report on the state of democracy includes the results of an assessment conducted in 5 South Asian countries.
The methodology includes cross-section surveys, dialogues with political activists, case studies, and qualitative assessments modelled by the IDEA Assessment Framework.
The research was supported by the Lokniti, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, International IDEA, the Department of Sociology of Oxford University, the EU, and the Ford Foundation.