

Summary

State of Democracy in South Asia: India

SDSA Team

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Editor: Sethi, H.

Principal investigators: Peter R. de Souza, Subas Palshikar, Yogendra Yadav

Country Coordinator: Sanjay Kumar

After 60 years of independent rule, and despite having one of the best democratic records of the region and the world, India has also contended with the problems of diversity, poverty and human rights. The State of Democracy in South Asia points out the major strengths and weaknesses Indian democracy.

Key Recommendations:

- Measures must be taken to safeguard the primacy of democratic government over experts or international institutions.
- Measures to reduce the scale of competition and decentralize politics are required: such as the creation of smaller states in the Indian Union, increasing the financial powers of the states and territories and improving the finances and powers of the *Panchayati Raj* and *Nagar Palika* bodies.
- There is a need to improve access to resources in politics.
- Democratization needs to be strengthened by implementing freedom of information legislation, the autonomy of public broadcasting, democratization of media ownership and public accountability of media practices.

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 with widespread support: 88% of the surveyed citizens from the five countries in the region consider that democracy is suitable for them. In India, this proportion amounts to 92%.

The data indicates that India and Sri Lanka show the strongest levels of support for democracy. However, in both countries, there is a favourable view of strong personal leadership and rule by experts.

Religion shows up in the survey as a major factor: 40% of the surveyed population in South Asia agree that religious leaders, rather than politicians, should make decisions. This trend is stronger in Bangladesh and Pakistan. Yet, this preference cuts across religious lines, and differs from country to country: so while Muslims in Pakistan are the least supportive of democracy, Muslims in Sri Lanka are the most supportive of democracy, and Hindus in India, Nepal and Pakistan show stark differences in their levels of support for democracy.

At the regional level, 26% of the respondents were identified as “strong democrats”, and 22% as “non-democrats”. Nevertheless, the sum of “strong” and “weak” democrats in the five countries outnumbers “non-democrats”. India has the highest level of “strong democrats” in the region with 41% of the surveyed population being defined as such.

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 – especially 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 provided by democracy accounts for much of the difference 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 of what democracy means, determined 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 understanding 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 the 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 recognised by the majority of the respondents as a crucial attribute. That explains why the capacity to provide for basic necessities is considered to be the most essential attribute of democracy according to 39% of the respondents, followed by the existence of equal rights, preferred by 37% of the surveyed population. This trend is stronger amongst non-elite and poor, while elites stress equal rights and 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 modern politics provided the basis for the creation of some of these communities. This provides an opportunity for struggle by marginal social groups while creating space for majoritarian interpretations of democracy: almost 66% of the surveyed population agree 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 attributes certain 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. 46% of respondents in India 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:

- Colonial and modern institutions were used in India to cope with power of traditional social norms and structures that threatened to block the expansion of democracy.
- Colonial and monarchical (in the case of Nepal) arrangements were used as effective instruments of regulation to preserve the new state. In India this was exemplified by that the two federal constitutions of India and Pakistan evolved from two colonial legislations (the Government of India Acts of 1919 and 1935)
- Finally, colonial and monarchical institutions were seen by the elites as assurance of counterbalancing 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 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 legal provisions, enforcement is not at all secured. “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 religions – Islam in Pakistan and Bangladesh, Buddhism in Sri Lanka, and (until recently) Hinduism in Nepal – run counter 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, an independent judiciary and civilian supremacy. However, in line with the 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 on 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 these constitutions. Nevertheless, this is effective only in India and Sri Lanka.

British India used federal arrangements as mechanisms to provide a share of power to different communities and strike balances between majority and minority communities. After independence, both India and Pakistan formally adopted federal systems. However, centralization has been the main tendency in both federations: although both countries have bicameral parliaments, the federal structure has not been able to seriously constrain elected governments. Moreover, the national legislatures in India and Pakistan enjoy wide powers, and provincial autonomy is therefore one of the most persistent demands in both countries. Demands for autonomy have been met in India with regionalization policies since the 1990s, such as a uniform rural government system, *Panchayati Raj*, which reserves 33% of the seats for women, and an urban government system, besides the development of regional-based coalition governments.

The first-past-the-post electoral 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 in 1978. However, the expected effects over 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. Notwithstanding that the President of India appoints the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), the Election Commission of India have of late demonstrated independence. Over 80% of the respondents of the 2004 National Election Survey also indicated that they believe elections in India to be fair or somewhat fair. In spite of this, instances of malpractice and electoral violence have been reported.

Mechanisms of 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.

India's experience during the period of emergency (1975-1977), represented a major deviation from constitutional democracy: the centralization of power in the hands of the Prime Minister, which could not be countered by the legislative and the judiciary, was finally dismantled by the voters.

Finally, in 2006 the media in India was considered to be "partially 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 India, trust is based on a longer experience of democracy.

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 in the region; the same occurs, Pakistan being the exception, with the courts and the Electoral Commissions. These levels of trust do not apply, however, to the police or the civil service: apparently, those institutions with a stronger interface with the public seem to score lower than those that are more distant. On the other hand, the most visible institutions, the ones that have more contact with the people - the Parliament, political parties, police and civil service- are the ones that score lower levels of trust. In India, almost 90% of the surveyed population expressed that they trusted the army while the same number for the

police was less than 50%. Almost 60%, however, articulated that they trust the civil service.

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 the media. On the other hand, the assessment shows that trust in institutions is less dependent on cultural traits of the population, and more on the political experience and social position. Income levels and class are the least important determinants in India, and Muslims and Christians in India have higher levels of trust than the average.

The researchers consider that 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 India the Backward Castes have increased their presence in provincial legislatures and 33% of the seats in local government bodies are reserved for women.

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. 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 part of the democratic effort. However, state building has led to the suppression of cultural differences. Institutional design throughout the region reflects 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, the popular response to assertions of minority identity seems to lead towards majoritarian behaviour. Even in India, a country with low levels of majoritarianism that emphasizes 'unity in diversity', built-up pressure has been handled in a framework of the non-negotiable supremacy of the nation-state and the country has experienced both regional and ethnic tensions.

National pride is pervasive: 98% of the region's population is proud of its nationality. This 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 India and Pakistan, where federal arrangements were adopted, the tensions and struggles are still visible. In India, major movements developed due to the perceived imposition of Hindi and the establishment of linguistically homogeneous states. Moreover, the Union retains the power to dismiss state governments on grounds of "constitutional breakdown".

However, there is an increasing acceptance of federal norms and development of innovative mechanisms for settling the contested claims between the Union and regional units. For instance, the Indian State's handling of the Mizo insurgency which lasted two decades: the signing of a "peace accord", free elections that led to an insurgent leader rising to become Chief Minister of the province, and a "state funeral" given to an ex-insurgent contributed to the successful resolution of armed secession. In addition, permitting the emergence of new states, the creation of autonomous

units within states in order to address developmental and political aspirations of different ethnic groups, and the formation of the Inter-State Council have successfully helped to neutralise separatist tendencies.

The challenges posed by social diversity and the overlapping of spatial and social diversity - 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 and homogeneous entities; and there are no fixed majorities or minorities, as the self-recognition as a member of the a majority or minority depends upon regional or political contexts. For example, Muslims, though a religious minority in the Indian context, are a majority in the Kashmir Valley, while Hindus, a religious majority elsewhere, are a minority in Kashmir, Punjab and several hill states of the North-East.

According to the survey, nearly half the respondents could not offer any response to whether they thought of themselves to be part of a majority or minority. Of the respondents who were cognisant of the distinction, almost 40% recognized themselves as belonging to a minority.

There was a significant mismatch between the official status of the religion of the respondents and their self-recognition as a 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. However, 20% of the respondents from minority religions in India saw themselves belonging to the majority.

According to the researchers, the issue of religious minority rights poses the biggest challenge to South Asian states. Four out of five states prioritize 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 India, despite a policy of equal treatment towards all religions, inter-religious conflicts have contributed to a siege mentality amongst its largest religious minority, Muslims. This community suffers high indices of social and educational backwardness, and its political representation is significantly below its population share. However, symbolic and nominal attempts to accommodate minorities are seen as “appeasement” by the majority.

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. India comes out as a champion in this respect thanks to linguistic policies, constitutional provisions and affirmative action policies for castes, tribes and other socially and educationally backward classes.

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. This is the case of the near sub-humanization of the Naga and Mizo tribes in North-East India.

The third, and dominant model, is that of majoritarianism. This response appears to be linked to the support of democracy, understood as the legitimate rule of the majority over minorities, and to 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 India and Bangladesh, while the proportions 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: thus, Muslims in India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka 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 intelligible set of choices. The large space occupied by political parties can be explained precisely by their lack of institutionalization, solid ideology and policy agenda which allows them to organize resistance and lead struggles.

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

After independence, all assumed central roles in designing and managing the 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 coalition 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 as 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 splits were caused by leadership clashes.
- Regime-fostered parties, forged by non-democratic regimes which survived in the arena of political competition include the Pakistan Muslim League formed by Ayub Khan, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party formed by Zia-ur Rahman, and the Jatiya Party set up by General Ershad.
- Ethnic and regional pulls have often resulted in the formation of new parties. India has witnessed the rise of many caste or regionally 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). 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.

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 system 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. India has seen a rapid proliferation of political parties since 1989, where the effective number of political parties rose by seven in 2004. This party system has changed from the one-party dominance to a multi-party system organized around a bi-nodal alliance scheme.

It appears that larger numbers of political parties 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, though this proportion is higher in India, with 48%.

The demise of one-party dominance has led to coalition politics and the need for support from smaller parties. Moreover, all political parties in the region face two challenges dealing with 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 aggregate 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 made parties vulnerable to determined intervention of vested social interests, national and global capital and organized 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 Bandaranaiques 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. However, 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. Participation in voluntary activism is relatively widespread. However, 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 respondents report being members of a trade union, the same proportion as in India.

Trade union membership is less extensive amongst the poorer workers. This limited engagement

may be caused in part because unions find it easier to work with the organised 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, the levels are doubled when it comes to participation in protests, demonstrations and related activities. In general, 19% of the respondents indicate they have participated in protests, struggles or movements, though a smaller proportion in India, with 15%.

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, though not so much in India, where only 6% of the respondents declare participating in them. 16% of respondents from India declare participating in women's organizations.

The researchers found that party and non-party organizations actually overlap. Nearly 75% of trade union activists in India identify themselves with a political party. The relationship between protest activity and party identification is even stronger, with 73% of the protesters in India identifying themselves with a political party. Finally, 73% of the protesters also identify themselves as campaigners.

Besides liberation and democratic social movements, popular movements based on religious issues seem to be gaining strength throughout the region. According to the surveys, 33% of the population in South Asia participates in a religious movement, though a smaller proportion declares this kind of participation in India (24%).

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 Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal in India; the Majlis, Jamat-e-Islami or the Tabligh in Pakistan and Bangladesh; 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 discriminatory and exclusionary process of growth and development, insurgency reflects the dead-end of democratic politics, the inability of states and regimes to accommodate the urges of disaffected peoples. In India, Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, Assam and the North-East have each experienced armed insurgencies. Nowadays, the armed struggle of the Naxalite affects one-fifth of the districts of central India, areas of traditional habitation of tribal peoples, and has successfully eroded the development claims of the state and pushed government agencies and political parties out of the affected regions.

In general, there is popular support for armed insurgency: in Nepal, 40% of the population has great trust in the Maoists; while in India, almost 40% of the surveyed population feels that Maoist demands are genuine. However, significant majorities disapprove of the methods. Thus, peaceful and negotiated solutions are preferred: this is the case of Sri Lanka, where all ethnic and religious groups, including the Sinhala, favour negotiations over military solution to end the conflict.

There is a strong ongoing debate about the efficacy of the voluntary sector and its contribution to deepening democracy. Despite the emergence of issues unforeseen by political parties and state agencies, critics remain sceptical about the nature of their claims, the non-representative, unaccountable and undemocratic nature of many organizations, their links with donor agencies and their capacity for disrupting national agendas and policies.

The assessment team approached the question of human security by tilting away from expert-based perceptions and traditional strategic views of security towards the views 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 during the last year. However, this proportion is the lowest in India, at 6%.

These experiences of insecurity do not translate into perceptions of insecurity: only 6% of the regional population feels unsafe, while more than 70% feel safe in their own dwellings. This perception of safety is the strongest in India and Sri Lanka, and lowest in Nepal. 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, and 25% feels less secure. This trend is followed by India, with 45% of the population feeling more secure.

Women are seen, both by men and women, as less secure. One out of six respondents consider it unsafe for women to go out after sunset: this rate is three times higher than the general level of insecurity in South Asia. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, more men than women consider it unsafe for women, while the opposite happens in India and Sri Lanka. In India, Bangladesh and Nepal, men were equally divided over women's safety at work, while in Pakistan the proportion of men who consider it unsafe is double that of men who consider it safe for women in 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 the 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, the people's views on security run counter to expert knowledge. 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 communal violence, while people from specific regions are more concerned about issues of war and terrorism: this is the case in the Hindi heartlands in India; the Sylhet region in Bangladesh; the northern areas of Sri Lanka, 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 about 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 that are crucial for the continuity of the 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 who had contact with these agencies, has also been one of harassment or assault for another 17% of people in the region. This proportion is worse when it comes to interaction with the police: while 39% of the population who interacted with police force considered them helpful, 21% reported an instance 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, and only 37% expects equitable treatment. In India, 69% of the population would go to the police in case of need.

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 achieving freedom from want. Per capita income in the region is less than half the global average and below the average for developing countries. In Bangladesh and Nepal, their income per capita is four times lower than the global average, while Sri Lanka is almost at the level of developing countries, with a Gross Domestic Product of US\$ 4390 per capita vis-à-vis US\$ 4775. Levels of literacy and enrolment are also far from meeting the global average, except for Sri Lanka and India.

Nearly 30% of the population lives below the poverty line, despite claims of sharp reductions of poverty levels in the region. Thus, the proportion of people living below the poverty line in India shrunk from 39% in 1990 to 26% in 2000, while in Bangladesh it fell from 59% to 50% during the same time frame. 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% between 1990 and 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. However, this proportion is higher in India, with 63%.

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

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 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 situation: 50% of the respondents are satisfied or very satisfied, while 29% feel dissatisfaction. However, the better the objective conditions, the higher the level of satisfaction.

This lack of correspondence between objective economic conditions and popular consciousness opens up a range of political possibilities. More benign views on one's own conditions reduce pressures on the state, providing room to engage with these issues in the long run. However, this can be used to disengage from the issue, while complicating political mobilization based on class. In

this sense, both democratic and non-democratic regimes in the region have neglected the challenge posed by mass poverty and destitution due to several reasons. First, the issue of poverty has not been adequately articulated in the public domain, and the media tends to mask the systemic nature of poverty. The media, when free from state control, tends to favour upper class demands. Second, while poverty is talked about, the poor do not become a category of political mobilization: they tend to be mobilized along religious and/or ethnic lines. Third, direct and instrumental control over political actors and organizations by powerful economic interests is an expanding trend all over the region. Fourth, the structure of economic inequality in capitalist systems involves an embedded drag as most of the crucial economic decisions are taken by the private sector. This is compounded by the emergence of independent centres of power and regulation, creating the fear of “capital strike” and “capital flight”. Finally, the weakness of accountability mechanisms allows ruling parties to deviate from promises made.

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, not all of these policies are accepted by the public: 50% of the population rejects both privatisation and down-sizing of the government. Privatisation is most opposed in India and Sri Lanka, and the least opposed in Bangladesh. Nearly 60% of the population opposes the privatisation of public services, and it is more intense within less privileged groups as the poor, non-literate and rural dwellers. In spite of this, the opposition to liberalisation is much weaker when it does not touch public services or the government. Thus, with the exceptions of India and Sri Lanka, more people, particularly in Pakistan and Bangladesh, favour the entry of foreign capital than not. And redistributive policies, such as putting ceilings on wealth and income, find more favour in India and Bangladesh, but are 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: public legitimization of shared values, adherence to norms of accountability by increasing people's confidence in themselves, 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 the cultures of democracy has to do with 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 this proportion is slightly higher in India at 67%.

More than 60% of the respondents in the region consider that elections are held with relative fairness. This proportion is the same in India.

In relation to the levels of public satisfaction with democratic functioning, people in the region are split between full satisfaction and full dissatisfaction with democracy: however, excepting India and Bangladesh, the majority in the other three countries is not fully satisfied with democracy. The record of satisfaction with democracy is stronger in India and Bangladesh, though the former is more critical of its performance, particularly regarding the lack of material amenities.

The workings of democracy do not appear to have produced greater attachment 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 the minorities in public life is a major area of concern.

- In India, throughout the 1990s there were riots between the Hindu majority and the minority Muslim community. The conflict was centred on claims over a medieval place of worship in Ayodhya, state of Uttar Pradesh. This conflict was used by Hindu nationalist groups to generate support for a view of India having and requiring a Hindu cultural identity. In 2002, a train carrying more than 50 Hindu activists returning from a visit to Ayodhya was burnt. This was the worst manifestation of violence so far, and it triggered the most calculated statewide violence against Muslims. The state government, led by the BJP did not take serious measures to control the outburst of violence, which was denounced by several human rights organizations. Unofficial statistics indicate that more than 2000 Muslims were killed in the violence.
- 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 localized identities. Thus, the survey indicated that despite a strong sentiment of nationalism in South Asia, expressed by 53% of the respondents, there is also a strong regionalism, indicated by 23% of the respondents. The researchers deduce that 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 during the last decades:
- The formation of India and Pakistan in 1947, and the formation of Bangladesh in 1971, drew on strong cultural identity foundations associated with the idea that the nation is defined in cultural-religious or linguistic terms.

Links

Democracy Asia Website - <http://www.democracy-asia.org/index.htm>
Centre for the Study of Developing Societies - <http://www.csdn.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 10 areas in 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.

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