

# State of Democracy in South Asia: Nepal

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite a widespread feeling that the achievements of the 1990 People's Movement were lost, the popular struggle against monarchy and in favour of a republic is still on track. The State of Democracy in South Asia Project points to the crucial role of the people if democracy is to be realized in Nepal.

### ***Key Recommendations:***

- Reforms must be aimed at inclusion in the electoral system and proportional representation is therefore better suited to ensure fair representation.
- Federal arrangements, ethno-regional divisions, or autonomous regions would be most suitable to improve power distribution.
- The composition of the Constituent Assembly is crucial in determining the future of Nepali democracy.

### ***Key Findings***

#### *Aspiration for democracy*

The young Republic of Nepal does not fit the trend of global democratic triumph: democracy has not yet been fully consolidated, nor does the country have the economic conditions that are expected to give solid foundations to democracy being achieved. Nevertheless, 79% of the citizens of Nepal consider that democracy is suitable for their country, lowest in South Asia but noteworthy in the context of long history of monarchy. In the South Asian region, the combination of formal education, media exposure and informal political education accounts for much of the difference in support for democracy.

#### *Meanings of Democracy*

The study found that there is no single South Asian meaning of democracy. Each country, region and group shares a different conception of what democracy means. However, the survey indicates that a positive notion of freedom, which extends to freedom from want and need, is recognized by the majority of the respondents as a crucial attribute. That explains why the capacity to provide for basic necessities appears 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 tendency is even more accentuated in Nepal, where 51% of the population surveyed stressed

the importance of basic necessities as an essential attribute of democracy, followed by 31% who favoured equal rights.

### *From Promise to Design*

At the time of preparing this report, the constitution of Nepal was still to be drafted. However, Nepal is traditionally a particular example of constitutional deviation in the region, where the King gradually assumed executive powers from 2002 onwards. In 2005, the King assumed all powers by dismissing the government, suspending the political process and the observance of human rights. In May 2006, a mass mobilization for the restoration of democracy pressured the King to yield, and the Parliament was then reinstated and a constituent assembly formed.

### *Institutions and People*

In South Asia, more people tend to have confidence in institutions than those who distrust them, however, the most visible institutions - the Parliament, political parties, police and civil service- score lower levels of trust. In Nepal it is more about investing hope in political institutions, which is assumed to be related to a longer tradition of struggle for democracy. In the case of Nepal, confidence levels in the police and the civil service are higher than the regional average with over 60% of respondents declaring trust in these institutions, while the Parliament and the political parties are the least trusted institutions, averaging 55%.

### *Dealing with Diversity*

Of all the countries surveyed in South Asia, Nepal demonstrated the highest level of respondents, 60% who were not familiar with the distinction of 'minority' and 'majority', and majoritarianism is virtually non-existent in the country. This might be ascribed to the Nepali policy of 'one nation, one dress, one language', and domination of elite upper castes from the Hills, resulting in severe estrangement and invisibilisation of minority groups such as the Madhesi. Nevertheless, there is a growing recognition of regional distinctions and this is in part due to the country's process of restoring multiparty democracy, which has forced it to recognize the existence of ethnic and religious minorities.

### *Party Political Competition*

Political parties in South Asia are the principal force around which public debate is organized and parties initially took shape as movements and vehicles for mass mobilization, articulating democratic aspirations of the people and shaping nationalist consciousness. However, splits in major parties and ethnic and regional pulls have resulted in the formation of new parties. In Nepal, despite the 40 parties that participated in the last election, the effective number of parties has remained around four since democratic elections were held in 1991. This situation is expected to change with the intensification of politics after the restoration of Parliament and the entry of the Maoists into the democratic arena. Also worth noting is that in Nepal, the trust in political parties sharply increased between 2004 and 2006, going from 40% to 64% of the surveyed population expressing trust in political parties.

### *Beyond Parties and Elections*

Participation in voluntary activism is relatively widespread. However, the survey shows that it is easier for elites to afford and participate in voluntary organizations. In the case of Nepal, increased participation in NGOs can be explained by the difficulties experienced in establishing government mechanisms for development and service provision. There is a strong ongoing debate on the efficacy of the voluntary sector and its contribution to the enlargement and deepening of democracy. On the other hand, there is popular support for armed insurgency; an extreme manifestation of popular mobilization that reflects the dead-end of democratic politics. In Nepal, 40% of the population has great trust in the Maoists. However, significant majorities disapprove of the methods; thus, peaceful and negotiated solutions are preferred

### *Freedom from Fear*

In Nepal, 8% of respondents say that they, their family members or acquaintances faced physical assault in the one year preceding the survey (2004). However, Nepal shows the lowest perception of safety in the region, which 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 asking how secure people felt in comparison to previous years. The impression given was generally positive: 37% of South Asia's population feels more secure than in the past, and 25% feels less secure. Nepal, on the other hand, had a majority of people feeling less secure than in previous years: 53% of the respondents versus 12% who felt safer than before.

### *Freedom from Want*

South Asia is still far from achieving freedom from want. The per capita income level in Nepal is four times lower than the average global and the country shows the worst level of human development in South Asia. When it comes to development policies, the states of the region have for the last decades moved away from state-led development strategies, embracing economic reforms and liberalization, privatisation and globalization. However, 50% of the population in the region rejects both privatisation and down-sizing of the government. Nevertheless, the opposition to liberalization is much weaker when it does not touch public services or the government. In Nepal, the surveyed population tilted towards favouring the entry of foreign capital while redistributive policies, like putting ceilings of wealth and income, are only slightly favoured.

### *Political Outcomes*

There exists a widespread acceptance of democratic procedures in the region, making democracy the only legitimate game that everyone aspires to. One of the most significant transformations related to achieving a culture of democracy has to do with people moving away from being subjects to becoming citizens. One such aspect is that the right to vote is not only taken seriously, but also the effectiveness of the vote itself. The survey shows that 75% of Nepalese consider that their vote makes a difference, which is considerably stronger than the regional average of 65%.

#### **Why perform an assessment?**

This executive summary is the result of a major assessment project launched by Lokniti Programme for Comparative Democracy, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, International

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

### **Assessment Approach**

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

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