

State of Democracy in South Asia: Pakistan

SDSA Team

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Recommendations:

- Popular faith in democratic norms must be rejuvenated.
- Endemic political interventions by the armed forces must be dealt with.
- Political parties must evolve and gain the ability to articulate public aspirations and interests.
- Relationships between national and provincial governments must be reworked in order to redress grievances coming from Punjabi domination.

Key Findings

Aspiration for democracy

Pakistan does not fit the trend of global democratic triumph; democracy has neither been fully consolidated, nor have the economic conditions that are expected to give solid foundations to democracy being achieved. Nevertheless, 84% of the citizens of Pakistan consider that democracy is suitable for their country. However, Pakistan has the highest levels of identified non-democrats of any country in the region and 50% of the respondents are indifferent to democratic rule. The survey also indicates that in Pakistan, almost 60% of the population supported army rule when this study was conducted and over 50% of the surveyed population demonstrated preference for major decisions being taken by religious leaders.

Meanings of Democracy

The study found that there is no single South Asian meaning of democracy. Each country, region and group shares a different conception of what democracy means. However, the survey indicates that a positive notion of freedom, which extends to freedom from want and need, is recognized by the majority of the respondents as a crucial attribute of democracy. That explains why the capacity to provide for basic necessities is seen as an essential attribute of democracy according to 29% of the respondents in Pakistan. However, the most essential attribute of democracy, according to 48% of the Pakistani respondents, is equal rights. The trend of favouring these two attributes is stronger amongst non-elite and poor, while elites stress equal rights and the power to change governments.

From Promise to Design

In Pakistan, constitutional arrangements do not seem to translate completely the promises of democracy into its institutions. For one, while the constitution includes special provisions to protect and safeguard religious minorities, enforcement is not secured and provisions allowing a state religion run counter to norms forbidding discrimination on the basis of faith. Secondly, even though civilian control of the armed forces is established in the constitution; Pakistan provides a number of examples of deviation from constitutional and legal frameworks with multiple military interventions, and on several instances the military engineered a constitutional transfer of powers. Finally, despite its federal system, centralization has been the main tendency in Pakistan. The national legislature in Pakistan enjoys wide powers, and provincial autonomy is one of the most persistent demands.

Institutions and People

In South Asia more people tend to have confidence in institutions than those who distrust them, the only exception being Pakistan where only 44% of the surveyed population expressed trust in institutions. However, just as in the other countries, trust in a specific institution in Pakistan seems to hinge on the performance of that institution. In contrast to other countries in South Asia, there are also low levels of trust in non-elected institutions that do not seek renewed mandates, such as the armed forces, courts and the Electoral Commissions, as these institutions are not seen as autonomous. In Pakistan, levels of trust seem to depend on locality, income levels and class. However, the Pathan minority in Pakistan shows high levels of trust.

Dealing with Diversity

Contrary to most of the region, Pakistan does not present high levels of religious diversity partly because it was Muslim nationalism that led to the creation of the nation-state. However, serious differences continue between regions, language groups, and sects within Islam. The most conspicuous example is how the establishment of Urdu as the main language added to the alienation of East Pakistan, leading to the creation of Bangladesh. In South Asia in general, national pride is pervasive: 98% of the region's population is proud of its nationality and this feeling is even 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. Despite this, the proportions of majoritarians in Pakistan exceed those who take a pro-diversity position.

Party Political Competition

In South Asia, parties initially took shape as movements and vehicles for mass mobilization, articulating democratic aspirations of the people and shaping nationalist consciousness. However, 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. Currently, there is a high degree of political fragmentation in Pakistan, which could be seen in the 2002 National Assembly elections when the effective number of parties rose to five. The trend is that criminality and corruption amongst party leaders are becoming more common and parties are becoming more identified with a single personality and are unable to develop internal mechanisms for leadership renewal.

Beyond Parties and Elections

The anti-colonial struggles during the early 20th century drew groups and individuals towards political parties, crystallising participation and mobilization this way from then onwards. The assessment shows that in South Asia the proportion of reported membership in trade unions; participation in protests, demonstrations and related activities; and participation in other non-party and non-political forums is far lower than expected. In Pakistan, these low levels are even more accentuated with participation at less than half of the regional average with; 5% union membership, 8% participating in protest, and only 3% report participating in other non-party and non-political forums. In addition, Pakistan has on several occasions experienced armed insurgency; an extreme manifestation of popular mobilization that reflects the dead-end of democratic politics.

Freedom from Fear

The relative sense of security was gauged in the survey by asking how secure people felt in comparison to previous years. The image remains positive in general, and Pakistan leads this trend with 55% of the population feeling more secure. However, political discourse and domestic politics affect popular concerns on security, and in Pakistan the post 9/11 discourse influenced popular imagination and led to global terrorism and war becoming important concerns. The armed and security forces in the region 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 Pakistan, only 50% of the population is willing to approach the police forces in case of trouble, which is one of the lowest levels in the region.

Freedom from Want

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 average for developing countries. Pakistan shows the worse rates of enrolment (38% of the population) and infant mortality (80 out of 1000). Despite claims of sharp reductions of poverty levels in the region, the proportions actually increased in Pakistan. In addition, just like in the rest of the region, the proportion of people in Pakistan who thought their income did not cover their needs was higher than the official figure of people living below the line of poverty. In Pakistan, 57% of the population considers that their income does not meet their needs.

Political Outcomes

In South Asia, there exists a widespread acceptance of democratic procedures; however, this trend is not as strong in Pakistan. 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. Voters in Pakistan have the least confidence in their vote in the region, with 50% of the respondents saying their vote makes a difference. In addition, in Pakistan a large section of the population (36%) is dissatisfied compounded by the perceived lack of equal rights (44% of the population), lack of freedom of expression (38%) and the inability to change government (30%).

Why perform an assessment?

This executive summary is the result of a major assessment project launched by Lokniti –Programme for Comparative Democracy, at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, International IDEA and the Department of sociology of Oxford University in five South Asian countries: Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. All these countries have experienced profound transformations during the last 50 years, and none complies with conventional, Western

notions of democracy. In this sense, a major goal of the assessment was to understand not only what democracy has done to South Asia, but also what South Asia has done to democracy.

Assessment Approach

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

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