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The European Union's support for democracy building in South Asia: an overview

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Executive summary

This chapter examines the main challenges for democracy building in South Asia, and how the European Union's (EU) role is perceived. Policy proposals and recommendations for consideration by the EU are presented with a view to addressing the gap between policy intentions and South Asian perceptions of the EU's ambitions in promoting democracy building. The chapter is based on consultations and research on the EU's role in democracy building in South Asia conducted by International IDEA during 2008 and 2009.

Despite the difficulties in democracy building faced by countries in South Asia, the region has done comparatively well (see e.g. the 2009 Freedom House Annual Report). In addition to the restoration of democracy in Bangladesh and Nepal, three other countries have also moved in a positive direction.

The role of the international community in bringing political change to South Asia has been largely limited to the smaller countries of the region. The EU evokes mixed feelings in South Asia. Some ask whether it speaks with a collective voice, or only reflects the cacophony of its 27 member states. Even if it does in fact have a collective voice, others ask if it has the capacity to intervene in a meaningful way to contribute to the sustainability of democratic institutions. Observers in the region note that the EU is not usually consistent in supporting democratic countries and that it frequently backs countries that lack democratic institutions for reasons related to its own convenience.

The EU has preferred to take a 'bottom-up' approach to promoting democracy and human rights in South Asia by dealing with civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which are the main recipients of assistance from the European Commission. Although the role of civil society is increasing in the region, there is an ongoing debate among scholars and policymakers about the kind of role it can play.

The recommendations from this process in South Asia strongly endorse the Development

in Democracy model, the main premise being to empower the people of the region and make political leaders and institutions more accountable to the people. The recommendations are grouped in three categories: those common to all the countries of the region; those that are country-specific; and those steps that may be taken by the EU to strengthen democracy building through the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) process. It has also been suggested that, while building on the seminal work based on the SAARC Social Charter, all these activities should happen in parallel with a comprehensive programme to develop a Bill of Rights and Obligations for democracies in South Asia, preferably through a South Asian Democratic Charter. The EU could play a significant role in this effort by bringing together experts and stakeholders in the region to chalk out a programme on how the Bill might be drafted and eventually adopted.

Introduction

This chapter identifies the key issues which have emerged from studies prepared for International IDEA by experts in South Asia, as well as the consultation conference on the role of the European Union (EU) in democracy building in South Asia held in Kathmandu in February 2009.

This chapter also examines the main challenges for democracy building in South Asia. Three country studies, on Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan, were prepared for this project. There is a section on how the EU is perceived in South Asia, based on its activities in some of the countries of the region. It also looks at the difficulties faced by these countries in establishing a stable democratic political order and how these could be overcome. The chapter tackles the complex question of how the EU and SAARC can work together on democracy building in South Asia. Finally, there are recommendations on how the EU can continue to play a major role in such democracy building, distinguishing between regional issues common to all the countries and specific activities which the EU might wish to consider that are relevant to supporting and building democracy in individual countries. The section also makes specific recommendations on how the EU and SAARC could collaborate to promote democracy at the regional level.

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The main challenges for democracy building in South Asia

There is a consensus in South Asia that political systems have failed to bring about changes to the practice of governance in the region. Although the region provided the first women head of state in the world and has produced more women heads of state or government than any other region, only 8 per cent of its leading policymakers are women. The rule of law in South Asia is widely disregarded and undermined in terms of both economic rights and equality under the law. Nor are there any 'clear-cut visions and directives for the development of minorities and marginalized groups', while strong feudal and traditional values and patriarchal cultural practices are common characteristics across the region. Democracy and, equally important, democratic culture, have yet to put down firm roots in the region. This deficit often leads to troubled relations, mutual mistrust, tension and hostility among political parties. A number of factors are believed to contribute to this situation:

‘decay of political parties and democratic institutions; venality of the ruling elite and their indifference to the common will; resistance to devolution of powers to the people; unimaginative dealing with minorities; electoral processes that fall far short of producing a liberal democratic order; and the nexus between criminals and corrupt bureaucrats, politicians and businessmen’.

The difficulties faced by Bangladesh and Nepal illustrate how nations in South Asia have had to cope with these problems. Since its independence in 1971, Bangladesh has functioned largely as an ‘illiberal’ and ‘fragmented’ democracy. Two prime ministers were assassinated in its first decade of independence, and this was followed by a military takeover of power. The bureaucracy that the democratic government inherited in 1991 had been compromised by military rule. Despite successful elections, the democratic process has failed in the aftermath. Three weak and largely non-functioning parliaments operated largely as a rubber stamp for endorsing the actions and laws of the government of the day. The Speaker continued to play a partisan role, denying the opposition parties the opportunity to raise issues that challenged the government. Politicization of the key institutions in the country, including the judiciary, the bureaucracy, the Public Service Commission, the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General, the National Board of Revenue and even the security services, in particular the police, led to a loss of faith in democratic government among the public.

As Farooq Sobhan has noted, ‘the biggest bane for democracy in Bangladesh has probably been the cripplingly fractious nature of party politics’ where a ‘political war of attrition’ between the two major parties undermined development and the development of a democratic culture in the country (Sobhan 2009). This has led to political disturbances in the country and a boycott of parliament, and also set back development projects since those sanctioned by one government have been put on the ‘back burner’ under another. Even Bangladesh’s ‘sole contribution to democratic innovation’, establishing a caretaker government to conduct elections under a retired former Chief Justice, which worked reasonably well during the elections in 1991, 1996 and 2001, collapsed in 2006 when the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led government with its two-thirds majority in parliament through constitutional amendments placed partisan individuals on the Election Commission to ensure its victory. This led the army to step in to declare a state of emergency. The elections in 2008 mean that Bangladesh is now attempting a ‘rehabilitation of democracy’ (Hachhethu 2009).

Attempts to establish democracy in Nepal since the early 1950s have been equally difficult. In 1960, King Mahendra stifled the first attempt at a royal coup, which was followed by the introduction of the partyless Panchayat system under his absolute rule. Nepal’s second attempt, the people’s movement in 1990, led to the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, which functioned largely as an ‘electoral democracy’ rather than a ‘liberal democracy’ because of its many dysfunctional characteristics. In the 15-year period from 1990 to 2005 there were 15 changes of government, which led to an erosion of the image and credentials of political parties and their leaders as well as the obfuscation of parliamentary democracy. The weakness in the system was challenged by two opposing forces: Maoists, who aimed to dismantle the monarchy and parliamentary democracy by launching an insurgency in 1996; and the monarchy, led by the new King, Gyanendra, who took executive power by dismissing the elected government in October 2002 and staged another royal coup in February 2005. Democracy in Nepal was restored for the third time in 2006 after the major political parties, which had been

South Asia has done comparatively well despite the difficulties in democracy building faced by countries in the region.

sidelined by the King, joined with the Maoists to overthrow the 240-year old monarchy. The election of a Constituent Assembly (CA) in 2008 transformed the balance of power in the country, increasing substantially the presence of ethnic and regional groups as well as women in the CA (Hachhethu 2009).

The 2009 Freedom House Annual Report notes that, despite the difficulties in democracy building faced by countries in South Asia, the region has done comparatively well compared, for example, to sub Saharan Africa and Central Asia (Puddington 2009). In addition to the restoration of democracy in Bangladesh and Nepal, three other countries have also moved in a positive direction. Bhutan completed the transition it began in 2004 by installing an elected legislature and representative government in 2008. In Pakistan, the military regime was forced out after a general election in September 2008, while in the Maldives, which in 2005 replaced a one-party dominated system with a multiparty system, in November 2008 Mohammad Naseem unseated President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who had been in office consecutively for 30 years. Of the remaining countries in the region, Afghanistan became democratic in 2005, but the democratic credibility of the Karzai government has since been eroded. India and Sri Lanka remain democratic, but the human rights record of the government in Colombo has been increasingly questioned by the international community. As Muni notes:

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‘Almost 1.3bn South Asian people, constituting about one-fifth of the world’s population, have chosen democratic governance – but this transition to democracy is still fragile and vulnerable’ (Muni 2009).

Muni suggests that there are two drivers behind the successful transition to democracy in South Asia: people power and the role of the international community in supporting democracy in the region. Civil society, in particular, has played ‘a crucial role in bringing major change to Pakistan and Nepal’ (Zaidi 2008). In Nepal, civil society developed a consensus among the political parties to overthrow the monarchy, and established links between the domestic struggle for democracy and the international community. In other countries the role of civil society was less critical. In Bhutan there was no role for civil society in the democratization process, while in the Maldives human rights issues were raised by the death in custody of a young boy. In Bangladesh, ‘although civil society groups and a plethora of international NGOs stood for democracy, none really opposed the caretaker government’ (International Crisis Group 2008). It was the political parties that stood their ground with the support of the students and young people.

The role of the international community in bringing political change to South Asia has been largely limited to the smaller countries of the region. In the case of Nepal, its role was highly significant. In 2002, when the king moved to curb democracy in the country, India, the United States and the EU tried to dissuade him. After he took direct power in 2005, the international response was first to attempt to persuade him to restore the democratic process, and then, when that failed, to support his opponents in overthrowing him. Other nations followed India’s lead in facilitating the bringing together of a seven-party alliance of the main political parties in Nepal along with the Maoists through a 12-point understanding in order to overthrow the King.

In Pakistan, the so-called war on terror ensured that the international community continued to support the military government for the sake of stability in Pakistan. The international community then quickly adjusted to the new civilian government. In Pakistan, Bhutan and the Maldives the international community accepted radical changes and worked with the new regimes. Some sections of the international community, most notably China and Russia, did not support the changes in Nepal and Pakistan, but quickly became reconciled to the developments taking place in these countries (Muni 2009).

Perceptions of the European Union in South Asia

The EU evokes mixed feelings in South Asia. Some ask whether it speaks with a collective voice, or only reflects the cacophony of its 27 member states. Even if the EU does in fact have a collective voice, others question its ability to intervene in a meaningful way in the name of the EU to contribute to the sustainability of democratic institutions. Observers in the region note that the EU is not usually consistent in supporting democratic countries and frequently backs countries that lack democratic institutions for reasons related to the EU's own convenience.¹ The EU has a weakness for playing second fiddle to the USA, especially where security and economic policies are concerned. However, it is generally recognized that although South Asia has not been in the frontline of policy for the EU, it has 'a clean slate to begin with and can help greatly without the prejudices of history on development issues and democracy building in the region.'²

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This perspective is clearly articulated in the summary of International IDEA's regional consultation conference:

The EU is seen to be well-positioned to collaborate with civil society and government in South Asia to strengthen democracy. This is predicated on the fact that the European countries after two world wars were able to transcend their respective nationalism for the greater good of their communities. The EU has rejected the use of military force as a means of resolving conflicts and does not seek to use economic power to establish hegemony over other states. For these reasons, the EU is perceived by the people of South Asia as a community that can exercise smart power to engage in a relationship with South Asian states and civil societies to consolidate democracy in the region.³

It is recognized in South Asia that the EU perceives democracy promotion as part of a 'peace strategy' with the inherent benefits of fostering socio-economic development and promoting human rights. Various treaties and documents underscore the importance that the EU attaches to consolidating democracy and establishing the rule of law in other regions of the world. The tools used by the EU to promote democracy

¹ Author interview with Ambassador A.N. Ram, March 2009

² Author interview with Dr. Sona Khan, Attorney, Supreme Court of India, March 2009

³ International IDEA, *Summary of Proceedings: Consultations on the EU's role in democracy building in South Asia*, Stockholm/Kathmandu, International IDEA, March 2009, available at www.idea.int/eu

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include instruments of traditional democracy, such as declarations and démarches, development cooperation and assistance programmes, and bilateral political dialogue and negotiations. So called essential element clauses also state that respect for human rights and democratic principles underpin all agreements between the EU and third parties. The EU does not, however, adopt a punitive approach to a breach of such clauses. The operational instruments at the disposal of the European Commission are primarily election

assistance/observation and the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR).

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On the whole, the initiatives taken by the EU in South Asia have created a positive image of the EU in the region. In Bangladesh, the European Commission identified six core areas in which it has a competitive advantage for itself, including capacity building to consolidate good governance and the rule of law. As part of the EIDHR, the European Commission provides support for electoral reform, election observation and the training of lawyers. Under an agreement signed with Bangladesh in 2001, known as the Trade and Commercial agreement, five key areas were identified for closer development cooperation. One of these was good governance and human rights, and it was under this provision that the European Union Election Observation Mission was deployed to observe the general election in October 2001.

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One of the greatest success stories of the EU’s involvement in Bangladesh has been the Preparation of Electoral Roll with Photographs (PERP) programme that was completed ahead of time in 2008. Over 80 million voters were registered in a scientific manner under the programme and the EU was the principal financier, contributing €15 million.

In the case of Nepal, the international community has long had a positive image in the country. During the Cold War, democracy was not the guiding principle for disbursing foreign assistance in Nepal, and Nepal received more bilateral than multilateral assistance. After the end of the Cold War, which coincided with the first people’s movement in 1990s, donors focused more on democracy building in the country. The three major areas where national stakeholders and the international community have collaborated for citizens’ actions include: democracy and human rights; empowerment of marginalized groups, such as women and dalit; and collective rights for excluded groups. These ‘software projects’, as opposed to ‘hardware projects’ related to infrastructure development, have been supported, among others, by the EU.

Since the success of the people’s movement and the restoration of democracy, the EU has revised its priorities in Nepal. Peace-building, education and the consolidation of democracy were identified as key areas for support for 2007–2013. The earlier priority

placed on poverty reduction and the integration of Nepal into the international community has been downgraded for the immediate future (Hachhethu 2009).

In the case of Pakistan, there are a number of reasons why the EU is regarded as a preferred partner for supporting the process of democracy building in the country. First, it has a 'good credit rating' through its role as an important trading partner and the role it played in supporting the Lawyers' Movement. Its support for the victims of the earthquake in Kashmir in 2005 was also perceived positively, as is its achievement of an economic union that holds together the 27 member states. In addition, unlike the USA, the EU has not taken actions that violate the territorial sovereignty of Pakistan, and is perceived as a peace-builder in the region. Finally, the EU has become part of the Friends of Pakistan Forum, which was launched in September 2008 to support the Government of Pakistan in its efforts to consolidate democracy.

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EU policy on Pakistan has focused mainly on development aid and to a lesser extent on trade and political issues. Like India, Pakistan has been attempting to establish a free trade agreement with the EU. There are indications that EU policy towards Pakistan will see a change in the near future due to the security threat posed by terrorism in the country. Under the EIDHR the EU has supported micro-projects in Pakistan, including programmes in the field of education, but a substantial proportion of the funds from this programme were reallocated to support the European Union Election Observation Monitors (EUEOM) for the February 2008 elections. The role of the EUEOM was perceived as a positive one in Pakistan, since its final verdict 'contributed to the general acceptance of the results in difficult circumstances, and resulted in increased public confidence in democracy in Pakistan' (Abbasi 2009).

India and the EU have on many occasions expressed their commitment to defending democracy and human rights, and India is viewed by the EU as a key partner in supporting these goals and in promoting stability and democracy. The Joint Action Plan of the India-EU strategic partnership stipulated that the two sides should work together on 'possible synergies and initiatives to promote human rights and democracy' in relevant international bodies, such as the United Nations Commission on Human Rights or the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly. These commitments have remained largely paper commitments, however, and there has been very little coordination on any of these goals.

In addition, as Jain observes, the EU's perception of democracy building is a little different to that of India. For India, it signifies the need to make the structure of global governance, through the G-8, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations Security Council, more representative and legitimate. Indians see Europe as 'clearly overrepresented, but not in a hurry to reduce its overrepresentation' (Jain 2009).

The EU-SAARC partnership in democracy building

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have developed slowly and have yet to mature, largely due to the restraint that South Asia has shown in its integration process (Bhargava and Reed 2009).

There has been little progress made between the EU and SAARC on democracy building. In 1992, a formal decision was taken by SAARC to extend its relations with regional and international bodies, including the EU. EU-SAARC political dialogues began in 1994 and the European

Commission and the SAARC secretariat signed a memorandum of understanding in 1996. This eventually led to agreements on cooperation in four trade-related areas: improved market access for SAARC products in the EU; rules of origin for SAARC products for export to the EU; technical support from the EU for the establishment of a South Asian Free Trade Agreement; and support for the harmonization of SAARC standards. The EU was admitted to SAARC as an observer in 2007, but the role assigned to observers is very limited, allowing them to present proposals for collaboration only at the invitation of competent SAARC bodies and no involvement in the decision-making process (Bhargava and Reed 2009).

The SAARC Social Charter does not touch on the subject of promoting or stabilizing democracy in the region, but in recent years there have been many references to the region's commitment to democratic ideals. There is a common consensus that the SAARC Social Charter, in particular, provides an 'entry point' for democracy building at the regional level.

The SAARC Social Charter does not touch on the subject of promoting or stabilizing democracy in the region, but in recent years there have been many references, either directly or tangentially, in a number of SAARC documents to the region's commitment to democratic ideals. There is a common consensus that the SAARC Social Charter, in particular, provides an 'entry point' for democracy building at the regional level.

There is, however, a fundamental difference between what a social charter means in South Asia and what one means in the developed countries of the West. In the latter case, it largely affirms and validates what has been developed and already exists. In the case of South Asia, the development of the SAARC Social Charter is about the 'progressive realization of social and economic rights' and how to make it an 'instrument that would empower and enable the peoples... to realize these goals'. Moreover, the focus in South Asia is on disadvantaged social groups that are 'relatively unorganized, voiceless and hence deprived of agency – the poor, women, children and youth', although not mentioning, for example, workers' rights. The document approved by the SAARC Summit in 2004 defines neither the rights of citizens nor the obligations of states. The final document was developed on the basis of regional consensus. The Charter plays with words in order to find a middle ground between a voluntary and a prescriptive, binding instrument, but the language gives it a binding character since the member states agree that 'the obligations under the Social Charter shall be respected, protected and fulfilled without reservation and that the enforcement therefore at the national level shall be continuously reviewed through agreed regional arrangements and mechanisms'.⁴ The main text is a mixture of declarations and binding commitments. Some articles adopt the language of UN declarations and resolutions and are not much

⁴ SAARC Social Charter, Art. 1, para. 2, www.saarc-sec.org/?id=13

more than statements of good intentions and exhortations to member states. However, others contain elements of international covenants and conventions of a binding nature. The Charter stands out as the first document from the SAARC countries to recognize the principle of good governance and, by implication, the Charter calls for a legal, administrative and judicial framework that ensures its implementation. This would include the need to establish a National Coordinating Committee, formulate a national plan of action through a broadly based participatory process and involve stakeholder participation in the implementation and evaluation of the Charter (Gunatilleke 2009).

Godfrey Gunatilleke believes that the Social Charter can have a significant impact on democratic processes and institutions in South Asia, and that the Citizens' Social Charter, which was prepared by the South Asia Centre for Policy Studies (SACEPS) in a parallel and participatory exercise, can 'provide a useful frame of reference for monitoring and implementing the SAARC Social Charter' because the Citizens' Charter develops each section with detailed targets and guidelines for a work plan (Gunatilleke 2009). In addition, Gunatilleke notes that although the SAARC Social Charter does not dwell on civil and political rights, which are the focus of the EIDHR, it provides 'the means for the enhancement and strengthening of democracy through the promotion of social, economic and cultural rights' which can be used to strengthen the 'social component' of democracy building in South Asia.

The way ahead: some policy recommendations

The EU and South Asia can work together in partnership for democracy building in the region. In this regard, the EU should consider not only how to build democracy, but also 'how not to build democracy', based on its own past experience in the region and elsewhere. The responsibility for initiating and implementing decisions to institutionalize democracy lies with South Asia. External actors can play only a supportive role, and their capacity to bring about fundamental change in the region, except in the case of smaller countries in special circumstances, is severely limited.

The EU and South Asia can work together in partnership for democracy building in the region. However, the responsibility for initiating and implementing decisions to institutionalize democracy lies with South Asia.

Another issue that frequently emerges is the need for the EU to be clear about the premise on which it bases its engagement in democracy building in South Asia. Does the EU want to promote 'democracy and development'? Or is it interested in promoting 'democracy in development'? It was emphasized during the International IDEA consultations that the difference between the two is fundamental. While the first sees the problem as a public administration issue, the latter recognizes the fact that the democratization of the development process is in itself an integral element of the promotion of democracy and establishing democracy with a real link to development. Furthermore, unless you 'make the broad constituencies of people into stakeholders in the democratic process you are in fact going to face serious difficulties in the sustainability of democracy'.⁵

These points have not yet been clearly incorporated by the EU into its policy for democracy building in other regions. The Human Development Report, developed

⁵ Author interview with Ambassador Rehman Sobhan, March 2009

by Amartya Sen and Mahbub ul Haq (UNDP 2009), tried to link these ideas and the Millennium Development Goals developed the notion further by setting targets to be achieved within specified timeframes. The Swedish perspective suggests that in democracy building ‘all decisions and measures must be taken with respect for universally accepted human rights and democratic principles’ and that the ‘interests and priorities of poor individuals themselves should be the point of departure for these decisions and measures’ (Bhargava and Reed 2009).

The recommendations coming out of the International IDEA consultations in South Asia strongly endorse the Development in Democracy model, on which the EU’s support for democracy building programmes in South Asia should be based. The main premise is to empower the people of the region and make political leaders and institutions more accountable to the people. The recommendations of this chapter are also made with an understanding that South Asia includes eight countries that are diverse and that a ‘one size fits all’ approach by the EU may not be conducive for democracy building in the region. Sri Lanka and India are at the high end of democratic evolution while many others are “nascent democracies” still struggling to establish a democratic order. There is still much scope for intra-regional sharing of experience and best practices. The EU, at best, can be supportive and a facilitator in a non-intrusive way, while South Asia has to find its own answers consistent with its genius and ethos. The recommendations are grouped in three categories: those that are common to all the countries of the region; those that are country-specific; and those steps that may be taken by the EU to strengthen democracy building through the SAARC process.

The recommendations that apply to all the countries are as follows:

1. *Democratization of political parties:* The common problem in South Asia is that even though political parties are very active in preaching democracy in their respective countries, many do not function in a democratic manner in either the selection of key leaders or their decision-making processes. The EU should consider programmes to encourage reform of the political parties in the region, preferably with the involvement of members of the European Parliament, in order to increase accountability and transparency. The EU is also in a good position to support programmes that enhance inter-party dialogue, which is sorely lacking in many countries in South Asia, in order to build consensus among different political forces.
2. *Capacity building for state institutions to establish proper checks and balances:* The patronage system in South Asia has spill-over effects for the way in which governments operate in the region, where the excesses of the executive branch often go unchecked. The EU should initiate programmes on democratic practices and procedures to ensure that the state institutions that have a crucial role in establishing good governance in the country function in a meaningful way. The major institutions in need of reform include the judiciary and the police, to name only two. To support this, training modules should be prepared by the EU in collaboration with the host countries so that officials learn operational methods from the best practices of European institutions, which allow them to stay above politics and beyond corruption. The EU should also provide technical support to upgrade logistical frameworks in key institutions, computerize public records and modernize the election commissions as well as providing support to national

human rights commissions to improve access to justice, particularly for groups that have been neglected in the past.

3. *Strengthening the legislative branch of government:* Many elected representatives in South Asian countries enter the legislative branch of government unaware of the role they are expected to play in order to meet the needs of their constituents. The EU should devise programmes that would bring them up-to-the-mark on crucial issues, such as consensus-building, forming an effective opposition, methods of working in different parliamentary committees and the standards of behaviour needed for the effective functioning of parliamentary democracy.
4. *Programmes to make civil society more effective:* Compared to the role of civil society in the EU, civil society in South Asia is only beginning to organize itself in order to contribute to a more effective and accountable democratic process. Civil society has registered successes in some countries, but has not yet been able to act in a cohesive manner to have a long-term impact on democracy building in the region. The EU should play an important role in democracy building by promoting activities that foster dialogue and knowledge-sharing among civil society groups within and between the countries in South Asia. Such a network could pursue programmes jointly to promote democracy, encourage coexistence among political parties and support institution building in South Asian countries. In addition, as some country strategy papers of the EU have acknowledged recently, there is a need for the EU to properly balance the involvement of civil society and government in its programmes, including in development programmes, so that there is a higher degree of ownership from the key stakeholders in the country.
5. *Media training:* The media in South Asia has developed significantly in recent decades and has been able to play a relatively effective role in sensitizing people on political developments and making political leaders and governments more accountable to the public. A regional network of media experts under the South Asian Media Net (SAFMA) has played a crucial role in bringing together experts in this field. The EU, in particular, should support media programmes in order to create a better understanding of concepts and issues and to strengthen the democratic process, improve reporting skills and parliamentary coverage, improve the reporting of political activities, and help to improve skills in the area of investigative reporting.
6. *Centres of excellence for the study of democracy:* The contemporary debate on democracy building in South Asia lacks a solid grounding of social and scientific research in many of the countries in the region. The EU should set up centres of excellence for the study of democracy in each of the SAARC member states. These centres could become catalysts for disseminating information on democratic practices and on how democracy functions, including how it affects the average citizen.

There is a need for the EU to properly balance the involvement of civil society and government in its programmes, including in development programmes.

In addition to the above recommendations, some specific measures that the EU might wish to take in individual countries are suggested.

1. *In Pakistan*, the USA and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies have prioritized military efforts and the so-called war on terror, while the social causes of extremism that feed terrorism and instability are not adequately addressed. The EU should play an important role in the fields of education, social awareness and employment generation programmes (Muni 2009). Similarly, EU aid is targeted to Pakistan's remote border areas to deal with the threat of terrorism, but such programmes should be extended to the larger cities, such as Karachi, Multan and Quetta, where similar threats also exist (Abbasi 2009).
2. *In Nepal*, the EU should focus its energy on bringing to its logical conclusion the peace process that moved a step further after the second people's movement in 2006. Democratic consolidation through state restructuring with a new constitution will be difficult until security sector reform, reconstruction and rehabilitation of the conflict-torn society have been accomplished (Muni 2009). Nepal is in the process of a radical political transformation, so the EU should take additional initiatives to 'build democracy from below'. The 2007 Nepal democracy survey noted that uneven development, which produces economic disparities and inequality among people in different groups and areas, makes people indifferent to the nature of the political system – be it democracy or dictatorship. The EU could play a lead role in getting the international community to refocus on development issues, which will benefit marginalized groups and reach out to the remote areas in order to help ensure an inclusive approach to democracy building in Nepal (Hachhethu 2009).
3. *In Bangladesh*, the EU could be a valuable partner in the process of consolidating democracy, which has oscillated dramatically in recent decades. Capacity building and the strengthening of institutions are essential if Bangladesh is to function and achieve stability. The EU should also play an important role in strengthening local governance by establishing a programme for participatory planning, and introducing efficient budgeting procedures and effective monitoring and control mechanisms for performance assessment (Sobhan 2009).

The EU has a major role to play in strengthening the 'social component of democracy' by providing support and sharing experience in a number of areas.

The recommendations on the complex issue of how the EU and SAARC might collaborate to promote democracy at the regional level represent a major breakthrough. The EU has a major role to play in strengthening the 'social component of democracy' by providing support and sharing experience in a number of areas, such as:

1. Providing assistance to the National Coordination Committees of SAARC member states to develop and strengthen the institutional framework for planning and monitoring the implementation of programmes under the SAARC Social Charter;
2. Supporting civil society to strengthen the participatory process and structures for implementation and monitoring of national plans of action;
3. Assisting the other local stakeholders with monitoring the national plans of action in selected areas where participatory structures for monitoring and accountability are developed and sustained;
4. Sharing the EU's own experience and assisting in the development of structures for

participatory governance and local level democracy to implement the objectives of the Social Charter; and

5. Using the social window of the South Asian Development Fund and collaborating with SAARC to select and finance activities under the Social Charter.

While building on the seminal work that has been done on the SAARC Social Charter, all these activities should happen in parallel with a comprehensive programme to develop a Bill of Rights and Obligations for democracies in South Asia, preferably through a South Asian Democratic Charter. The EU has a significant role to play in this effort by bringing together experts and stakeholders in the region to chalk out a programme on how the Bill might be drafted and eventually adopted. The best practices of the EU, the Organization of American States (OAS), the African Union (AU) and other regions could all be considered when preparing the document.

The EU has a significant role to play in this effort by bringing together experts and stakeholders in the region to chalk out a programme on how a Bill of Rights and Obligations for democracies in South Asia might be drafted and eventually adopted.

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