



Democracy in South Asia

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Abstract

Developed nations and international agencies take a keen interest in improving the political governance of the countries of South Asia by economically and technically supporting the region in order to stabilize the political situation. The European Union's objectives include strengthening its bilateral relations with the countries of the region, and consolidating the regional cooperation process represented by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. South Asia's crisis cannot be addressed by simplistic approaches to development aid. South Asia as a region has unique features and many contradictions. It is culturally, socially, economically and politically diverse, with a common cultural base but linguistic and religious differences. In order to increase the impact of measures and to promote greater efficiency in the use of resources, the European Commission intends to concentrate the scope of its development commitments on three focal areas: human and social development; good governance and human rights; and economic and trade development. Unless people are educated, healthy and have skills, and unless competitive national policies are developed to deal with the reality of globalization, there is no possibility of reducing the inequality gap. Reducing the divide between the urban rich and the rural poor or protecting and promoting the welfare of vulnerable groups in society call for additional support in areas where the private sector sees no profit in investing and the government does not have enough resources. Aid does and can play an important role in developing countries in overcoming some of the challenges they face, provided that resources are managed through democratic governance processes.

Summary of Recommendations

The cornerstone of any successful democracy lies in a constant educational ethos: literacy, fair elections, universal free education and ongoing educational opportunities for adults, including job retraining to adapt to changing economic circumstances. Citizens also need a multitude of stable institutions to ensure a general equilibrium in polity. These institutions are particularly valuable for binding society together, including minorities and the marginalized.

1. The promotion of good governance practices can broaden the notion of accountability to citizens.
2. People should be educated in order to create social sanctions against corruption.
3. Opportunities should be enhanced for the safe and secure participation by women in decision-making as equal members of the society.
4. The poor and weaker sections of society must be organized and empowered.
5. Decentralization and local government should be strengthened.
6. A link must be established between the governed and the government, and the public and policymakers.
7. There has to be an enhancement in the political and democratic space for women, children and marginalized sections of society.
8. Finally, the capacity of civil society must be strengthened.

The EU can play a critical role in consolidating democracy and ensuring stability in the countries of South Asia. It can provide the platform for all the major stakeholders, including civil society, to come together to strengthen accountable democratic systems and institutions. Careful design of the framework is required by incorporating contextual elements into the democratic system of politics and political parties in order to address the issues of embedded corruption and discrimination. Democratization of the political culture should be considered the primary area of concern. Without influencing the mindset of the people in power it may be difficult to change the persistent culture of violence and corruption and the power dynamics in political governance. The EU may have to consider a process of educating people about the value of democracy and the processes required to change the culture of politics.

The 'culture of silence', the 'culture of dependency' and the 'culture of corruption' therefore need to be replaced with the 'culture of devolved authority', the 'culture of transparency' and the 'culture of inclusion'.

1. Diversity, Commonalities and Contradictions of South Asia

South Asia is characterized by its large population, growing poverty, weak governance structures and feeble democratic institutions, increasing militarization and sectarianism. Most countries in the region experienced colonization before becoming independent sovereign states. Governments in South Asia have pursued national security through destructive military apparatuses, rather than sought security for citizens by actualizing their creative potential. South Asia currently spends around USD 15 billion annually on the military, reducing the budget available, for example, for poverty reduction.

Developed nations and international agencies take a keen interest in improving the political governance of the countries of South Asia by economically and technically supporting the region in order to stabilize the political situation. Europe is South Asia's most important trading partner and a major export market. Development cooperation

between the European Union (EU) and the countries of South Asia includes financial and technical aid as well as economic cooperation. Priorities include regional stability, and the fights against corruption, terrorism and poverty.

The EU's objectives include strengthening its bilateral relations with the countries of the region, and consolidating the regional cooperation process represented by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which is the only regional organization for cooperation in South Asia. It maintains bilateral relations with each of the eight countries that form SAARC.¹

South Asia's crisis cannot be addressed by simplistic approaches to development aid. South Asia as a region has unique features and many contradictions. It is culturally, socially, economically and politically diverse, with a common cultural base but linguistic and religious differences.

The region provided the world's first female elected Head of the State, but has since failed to produce women leaders of the calibre and stature of Sirimavo Bandaranaike or Indira Gandhi. Women are in less than 8 per cent of the leadership positions in policymaking circles in the region. It is surprising that a country like Sri Lanka, with a 90 per cent female literacy rate and annual growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in excess of 8 per cent, cannot contribute more to generate space for women in leadership positions to develop into leaders of the country. Violence is thought to be one of the major reasons, in addition to the lack of capacity, discriminatory policies and actions that stifle the active participation of women in political governance (South Asia Partnership International 2007). Political violence against women takes many different forms: physical and psychological. Cases of psychological torture are very common in the region. These take place when a woman wants to compete with men in political parties or wins an election to share positions of power. Character assassination of women politicians is a common form of violence as well as murder, rape, abduction, kidnapping, intimidation and torture of women and their family members.

Politics in the South Asian region is generally considered dirty and it is accepted as a male domain. Power dynamics inflate different forms of violence, either during the electoral process or while securing political party positions. The power of money, position and arms is considered key to providing a person with the required status in society.

Political systems in the region have produced many forms of government: democratic, socialist, military and monarchical. Military rule, monarchy and centralized autocratic political systems are accepted within the framework of democracy in the region. However, the systems lack visions and directives for the development of minorities and the marginalized. Thus, the fate of South Asian minorities and the marginalized in general and women in particular is ignored – despite various political experiments in governance.

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¹ The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the People's Republic of Bangladesh, the Kingdom of Bhutan, the Republic of India, the Republic of Maldives, the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka.

Across the region, democracy has been weakened, corruption has increased and the rights of citizens are denied. Economic liberalization and globalization have contributed to a further increase in income inequalities, whereby more privileged groups have enjoyed the fruits of development by controlling the limited resources.

The rule of law in South Asia is widely disregarded and undermined in terms of economic rights and equality for all, despite the fact that SAARC member states are signatories of international instruments. Lawlessness plays a dominant role in promoting bad governance in most South Asian countries. As a result, ordinary people have been deprived of civil liberties, security and socio-economic rights.

Despite its cultural diversity, strong feudal and traditional values and patriarchal cultural practices, which are common characteristics across the region, have hindered capacity building and the improvement and take-up of opportunities for women, Dalits, and tribal, ethnic and minority communities in South Asia. This has prevented marginalized communities, including women, from participating in political decision-making processes.

Troubled political relations have resulted not only in mutual mistrust, tension and hostility but also the continuation of feudal social practices in South Asian countries. Although the basic right of the people to a life of dignity and social justice has been theoretically accepted by all governments in the region, the current situation has led to indiscriminate violations of human rights. People are gradually becoming desensitized, development is losing its humane face and democratic institutions are being weakened. The development budgets of the South Asian countries are being diverted to defence activities, and people are being further marginalized as a result.

The EU, in line with the policy priorities of South Asian countries, has identified poverty reduction as its key objective. Good governance, human rights and democratization are also important priorities of the European Commission's development policy for South Asia. In order to increase the impact of the measures and to promote greater efficiency in the use of resources, the European Commission intends to concentrate the scope of its development commitments on three focal areas: human and social development; good governance and human rights; and economic and trade development.

2. The Crises of Democracy in South Asia

South Asian development is in a stage of crisis. Economically, most South Asian countries are increasingly dependent on the global market. International politico-economic processes, corrupt political leadership, inefficient state institutions and growing militarization all affect regional development. Local communities are gradually losing their significance as they are drawn into government 'modernization projects' and elites continue to enjoy their high positions. Finally, the situation for women has not changed significantly in spite of some increases in literacy, incomes and participation rates.

The crisis of democracy is manifested by pervasive nepotism and corruption, misappropriation of state funds, an absence of transparency and accountability in public administration, a lack of respect for the rule of law and ethical behaviour in public life and reluctance to delegate administrative or financial powers to grassroots organizations. There is growing consciousness of injustice and discrimination

among the rural poor, who have been ruthlessly exploited in the past by feudal elements.

Measures have been taken to reduce the role of money in politics. However, electoral contests are generally won with money and the coercive power of local elites. India has a powerful and independent election commission, but many other election authorities in the region are manipulated in one way or another. During the elections to the Constitutional Assembly, Nepal introduced measures to control campaign costs, which had positive results.

Although a two- or three-party system has been progressively evolving in most of the countries of South Asia, the mainstream parties have been in decline in terms of ethos, functioning and programmes. The role of religious parochialism in politics has substantially increased in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Despite the introduction of one or other variant of local self-government, substantive devolution has yet to take place in any of the seven nations. Democracy is yet to take firm root and democratic culture is still far from becoming the norm. Most importantly, the nations of South Asia are still in search of a social contract that can satisfy their people, regardless of gender, faith, ethnicity or religion.

The political systems of South Asia have failed to bring about any major changes in governance, with the exception of India's Village Political Governance System, *Panchayati Raj*. Mistrust of political parties and their leaders is common across South Asia. Changing political ideologies or splitting political parties have become common regional phenomena. Local and national political leaders change party in order to win an election or obtain position. The power game has led some political leaders to form their own parties. Incompetent politicians embezzle public funds and spend these to purchase loyalties. While all the countries of South Asia have democratic governments, their governance is not truly democratic. It is a disturbing paradox in the region that the more vigorous South Asian democracy is, the more dysfunctional it becomes. The problem in South Asia often arises from something France calls 'cohabitation' – an awkward arrangement by which a directly elected president must co-exist with a legislature controlled by a rival party or parties.

A close look at the electoral processes and political systems prevalent in South Asia reveals some major problems that affect the character of political formations, the level of participation, and the inclusion of women and minorities as well as the rural and urban poor, the peripheral regions and sub-national groups in the mainstream. In most cases, ruling elites dominate electoral politics, major political parties and the powerful institutions of state. While increased representation of women has been ensured in some countries, efforts to bring gender balance to representative systems, especially in national assemblies, have not yet proved successful. Democracy has become an occasional ritual for electorates manipulated by powerful groups. Violence is quite common, reflecting the existence of authoritarian tendencies across South Asian societies.

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Women in Politics in South Asia

The participation of both men and women is the cornerstone of good governance. Participation can be either direct or through legitimate intermediate institutions or representatives. While greater representation of women has been ensured through an indirect party-list system of proportional representation in Pakistan, efforts to bring gender balance to the representative system in the Indian national assembly have yet to succeed. Nepal achieved a 33.2 per cent representation of women in its recent election to a Constitutional Assembly. It remains to be seen how this will affect gender aspects of the new Constitution. In Bangladesh, the reserved quota provision has been changed in recent years, raising questions about commitment to gender sensitivity in political governance. In the most recent election, only 64 women were elected to the 350-seat parliament. Sri Lanka has the lowest level of representation of women in its national assembly, despite its over 90 per cent literacy rate among women. Ironically, the first female head of the state in the world was elected in Sri Lanka nearly 50 years ago.

The general level of political participation among South Asian women is not high. Even in pockets of greater political awareness among women, actual participation is often hindered by constraints on mobility and gender roles based on socio-cultural perceptions. Therefore, in spite of the high visibility of women at the higher echelons of government over the years, women's representation in parliament remains low – ranging from 33.2 per cent in Nepal to 20.6 per cent in Pakistan and 18.5 per cent in Bangladesh.

Research findings indicate a need for further affirmative action as well as special initiatives to mobilize women to act as effective leaders.

India amended its constitution in 1992 to reserve one-third of local government seats for women. This generated tremendous interest among the other countries of the region.

In 1997, both Nepal and Bangladesh introduced reserved seats for women in local bodies (20 per cent in Nepal and 33 per cent in Bangladesh). In Pakistan, one-third of the seats in local bodies are reserved for women. However, research findings indicate a need for further affirmative action as well as special initiatives to mobilize women to act as effective leaders.

The Performance of the Legislature

The flawed manner of choosing representatives reflects the farcical manner in which legislatures function in South Asia. The exhibition of lung and muscle power within legislative chambers has made legislators the object of ridicule rather than respect. Hardly a session passes without walkouts, deadlocks, suspensions of proceedings, forced adjournments and sometimes violence. Attendance is minimal, and maintaining a quorum is difficult. Proceedings often continue without a quorum without objections being raised. Legislators use their time during the sessions to do everything except legislate. The

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passage of laws and budgets without debate, and the issue of ordinances during inter-sessional periods reveal the sorry state of legislative functioning in South Asia.

Representation of Indigenous Peoples

Since 1999, the rights of indigenous peoples have been included as a thematic priority under the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and in the EU funding programme to support non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and cooperation with international organizations. The rights of indigenous peoples have also been identified as a thematic funding priority for the EIDHR in 2007–2013. A project has been initiated to build the capacities of government and indigenous organizations in Nepal for dialogue on and implementation of ILO Convention No. 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples. The European Commission is the principle donor to the South Asian component of EIDHR, the target countries of which are Bangladesh, India and Nepal. The ratification of ILO Convention No. 169 in Nepal was a major outcome of this project, but the real challenge will be its implementation, ensuring that its principles and provisions are mainstreamed into all the relevant policies and programmes. Similarly, the EU has promoted development and confidence building among communities to achieve a sustainable peace in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh. These projects have sought to strengthen democracy by enhancing the participation of indigenous and ethnic communities and protecting their rights. The initiatives have raised awareness among communities of the need to participate in the process of strengthening democratic practices. This was reflected in the results of the election to the Constitutional Assembly in Nepal.

Conclusions

However unstable, democracies are preferable to autocracies in South Asia, but the dangers of weakened democracy are not merely blocked legislation and ineffective government. Ambitious but thwarted Heads of the State are easily tempted to take unconstitutional measures. The same can be true of presidents or prime ministers. In parliamentary democracies an elected leader runs the country until the day his or her party or coalition loses its legislative majority. This means that governments are judged not by their ability to outmanoeuvre legislatures, but by the quality of their policies – a more efficient and more politically stable form of democracy than the unhappy cohabitation that produces such ugly confrontations in Bangladesh and Pakistan.

There are identifiable enclaves in South Asia – such as Karachi in Pakistan, Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh in India, the Chitagon Hill Tracts in Bangladesh, the Tarai Districts of Nepal and the Jaffna peninsula in Sri Lanka – where the writ of central authority is uncertain. This applies not only to areas of insurgency but also to areas where the administrative system has ceased to exist. There are instances where the governing authorities, such as the police, the military and bureaucrats, have themselves become anti-social elements. The recent terrorist incidents in Mumbai and Karachi, among others, reflect the weak security situation in these countries.

There is a growing consciousness of injustice and discrimination informing the rural poor, who have been ruthlessly exploited in the past by feudal elements. The failure to carry out a meaningful process of maintaining transparency in informing people about their rights and state policies, plans and programmes has created resentment. This has resulted in various class and caste conflicts in the region.

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Incompetent leaders blame the legislature for their failures; legislators blame presidents from rival parties. Finger pointing replaces responsibility, fuelling popular demand for a strong man (or woman) who can override political divisions (Satyabrata Rai Chowdhuri, 2004). The continuing feudal character of South Asian society lies at the heart of this problem. The past half-century has seen only the trappings of modernization. The core values and attitudes of leaders remain firmly embedded in the past.

3. The European Union's Contribution and Achievements in the Region

The EU believes that citizens in every country of the world should benefit from good governance, that is, government that serves the public interest effectively. To help partner countries on the road to good and democratic governance, the EU supports local ownership of governance reform processes, improved checks and balances in the public sphere and the empowerment of civil society actors. It also provides assistance

to put in place policies to combat corruption and prevent conflict. The EU supports action to promote the right to participate in the establishment of governments through free and fair elections, as well as to strengthen the role of parliament and the media in genuine democracy. The EU believes that these actions can make a major contribution to peace, security and the prevention of conflict.

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The EU has maintained bilateral relations with all the countries of South Asia since the 1960s. The European Parliament has passed numerous resolutions on political developments, including human rights, in the SAARC countries. The European Parliament believes that there is considerable potential for bilateral relationships between the EU and the countries of South Asia to promote and strengthen democracy and respect for human rights.

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rights, etc. The rhetoric is evident in Economic Partnership Agreements and FTAs as well as in Association Agreements and Country Strategy Papers. The EU is helping countries to improve trade by improving their standards and regulatory mechanisms.

Many argue that corporate interest is at the heart of the Lisbon strategy. They believe that the EU's competitiveness agenda, with its strong and aggressive push for

the liberalization of markets in goods and services and of investment regimes, will undermine development in the Global South. The agenda of economic integration and liberalization promoted by the EU as a model for the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to follow is dangerous for South Asia given the levels of poverty and inequality in the region and the absence of a system of social security comparable to that which exists in Europe.

All South Asian countries have an identical template for economic policy, but with different levels of resources, political structures and governance structures. The economic framework and globalization are rooted in the same neoliberal ideological framework and driven by the global flow of capital and technology, as well as the relocation of industry and production. Of course, not all countries in the regional have benefited from this process. India has done far better than the others.

It is interesting that while India and its immediate neighbours have economic linkages with non-regional industrial states, which have grown substantially in the past two decades, regional trade remains very low. The opposite is true of other regional organizations such as ASEAN and the EU, where economic integration has made great progress. All observer countries in SAARC have multiple webs of economic, political and strategic relationships.

South Asia is a region that will see further economic development and expansion in the coming decades (Rasul Bakhsh Rais 2008). Therefore, opportunities for investment, trade and relocation of industrial activity are likely to grow if all other issues affecting growth – the energy supply, trade policies and the global recession – are resolved. Globalization now shapes economies, cultures and even political attitudes. It is one of the autonomous effects of conscious economic and technological policies of the Western world. The end of the Cold War added extra ideological authenticity, swagger and aggressiveness to the neoliberal prescription for economic growth. With the exception of Iran, which joined SAARC for different reasons, other observers have played a big role in increasing global interdependence and economic integration.

It is argued that helping South Asian countries to expand cooperation among themselves would reduce the transaction costs of global integration. Greater liberalization of trade, investment and capital flows across South Asia would benefit multinationals in almost every field and cut their costs of production. Economic cooperation within the region or at the global level has positive gains for everyone engaged in it, with differential pay-offs depending on the various capacities of participant states. Economic growth and stability in any region, especially South Asia, are strongly linked to political stability and security. Unstable and insecure zones experiencing conflict cannot be integrated into productive economic processes, and, if these conflicts are not contained or resolved, their effects will spill over borders. South Asia has many past and present examples of how inter-state relations are affected by security challenges. Regional security problems in South Asia do not present a comfortable picture to foreign economic or security actors. India, because of its size, can isolate its heartland from its conflicted periphery – but other states cannot. Multiple points of conflict in the region and India-Pakistan rivalry present obstacles to economic

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cooperation and growth, in which all SAARC observers have developed a considerable stake.

The security implications of conflict in the region are no longer confined to South Asian states. Modern-day insurgencies have transnational linkages and support bases, flows of weapons and fighters, and political connections across borders. Most SAARC observer states have been directly affected by transnational militancy, and therefore have an interest in defeating or diffusing it. A good number of them are involved in reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. It is no coincidence that these observers drew closer to SAARC after the events of 11 September 2001, which reshaped the strategic relationships of the major powers in the context of India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Ongoing review and reassessment of the fight against international terrorism suggests that only through regional cooperation can insurgencies be defeated. The presence of major global economic and military powers, even as observers, will have a positive effect on how SAARC redefines itself as a meaningful regional organization. Its lacklustre performance in vital areas of cooperation has not pleased anyone.

Aid is a moral issue, and this is reflected in the relationship that developed countries have with developing countries. It is argued by Moyo in her book *Dead Aid* that governments' development finance should come from the private sector and economic growth rather than aid. Current levels of economic growth, however, cannot meet prevailing socio-economic conditions in developing countries in order to address the current crisis. Poverty levels would inevitably increase, and aid flows are likely to continue to decrease, job losses to continue to rise, and the gains from previous growth risk being eroded. In the current economic situation, the room to increase social protection expenditure has decreased and private sector investment flows seem likely to contract further (Mulemba 2009). The South Asian developing countries that rely on natural resources are particularly vulnerable to the harm caused by boom and bust cycles. The answer is not to cut aid but to ensure that aid is used effectively through people-centred planning and efficient governance. This will also, inevitably, increase the effectiveness of EU aid.

Unless people are educated, healthy and have skills, and unless competitive national policies are developed to deal with the reality of globalization, there is no possibility of reducing the inequality gap. Reducing the divide between the urban rich and the rural poor or protecting and promoting the welfare of vulnerable groups in society call for additional support in areas where the private sector sees no profit in investing and the government does not have enough resources. Aid does and can play an important role in developing countries in overcoming some of the challenges they face, provided that resources are managed through democratic governance processes.

4. The Way Forward for the Democratization of Politics

It is generally believed that the root cause of the crisis of weak democratic governance in South Asia is the expensive electoral process. This has been subverted by illicitly acquired money, which can also buy muscle power. The root cause of corruption is the role of illegally acquired money in politics. All the political parties spend huge sums on every election. The expense is treated as an investment to be recouped later. The electoral laws,

Electoral laws, especially those concerned with the observance of limits on election expenditure, must be enforced.

especially those concerned with the observance of limits on election expenditure, must therefore be enforced.

Reform is only possible if the people assert themselves and demand that the country be governed and not ruled, and that issues of good governance are seriously addressed. Public campaigns to secure the right to information could start a mass movement. The essential question, however, remains whether the governments in South Asia have the political will to reverse the downward trend in their polities.

A culture of silence in South Asia is a sign of the democratic deficit. Democratic governance begins with commitment to and respect for the sovereignty of citizens irrespective of religious, racial, linguistic, class, caste and gender diversities in an accountable, inclusive and participatory process. A radical reconstitution of governance is therefore required to make democracy functional.

Modern political governance is founded on the notion of a social contract between the state and its citizens. The equality of citizenship has created a basis for equal participation by all citizens in political governance, where the state is expected to command sovereignty and to provide a good standard of living by preserving positive values that enhance liberty, order and justice in society. In a multicultural society like South Asia, the active engagement of citizens in the entire web of social and economic associations that cover the democratic landscape is crucial for national and regional integration. Thus, citizens need to have control over their national economic, social and political life. Failure can bring a crisis of authority for the government and of loyalty to the state, political parties, parliament and the institutions of governance.

The societal conditions that help to foster a successful democracy include a responsible press, a universal public education system, and a populace literate enough and with enough political awareness to take advantage of the press and the education system to educate themselves politically. An environment must be created that enables the electorate to effectively judge the politicians they elect.

The cornerstone of any successful democracy lies in a constant educational ethos: literacy, universal free education, and educational opportunities including job retraining for changing economic circumstances.

Non-bureaucratic planning and decentralized management systems are also essential to enhancing democratic governance and transferring power to the marginalized and minorities. The popular participation of the marginalized and minorities in determining their needs by balancing public and private initiatives for alleviating poverty is a prerequisite of people-centred development processes.

Only democratic governance based on strong democratic principles can bring about desirable change. This can be achieved by devolving constitutional power to the citizens and actively involving marginalized people in decisions-making processes. It is the duty of a democratic leadership to protect the weakest members of society and to provide them with their inalienable rights and equality of opportunity in education, as well as inclusive economic and political participation. The 'culture of silence', the 'culture

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of dependency' and the 'culture of corruption' therefore need to be replaced with the 'culture of devolved authority', the 'culture of transparency' and the 'culture of inclusion'.

It is not possible for national governments to resolve the problems of governance and democracy separately. In this regard a joint effort by all governments and multinational and bilateral donors, including the EU, as well as civil society organizations in South Asia is essential to promote democratic governance and inclusive democracy in the region.

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This will not be possible without a common agenda for collective action to address the issues of poverty, corruption, political violence and the rule of law through a process of strengthening regional cooperation. All the interrelated, interdependent or interwoven issues of governance, democracy and social justice need to be analysed and resolved taking a participatory, transparent and accountable approach not only at the local and national levels but also at the regional level.

The diversity of political parties and systems in South Asia represents the mosaic of its social and cultural asymmetry.

The region's polity needs effective leaders to integrate this diversity and respond to key political questions such as region-building, a social contract, inclusive democracy and peace and to address the diverse needs of citizens.

Providing assistance to increasingly dynamic civil society groups in the region could help to promote the democratization process. The focus should therefore be on ensuring media independence and providing support for groups that advocate for human rights, including the protection of women and children, and support for marginalized communities.

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