



The New Democratic Wave and Regional Cooperation in South Asia

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Abstract

The South Asian region has experienced a democratic resurgence in the recent past while other regions of the world were suffering setbacks. All the South Asian countries now have a democratic system. 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. There have also been democratic failures in South Asia. The democratic credibility of the Karzai regime in Afghanistan and Sri Lanka's Rajapaksa regime has been seriously eroded. Both countries are caught in internal conflicts. The main challenge that the new wave of democracy faces in South Asia is its consolidation – the translation of the aspirations and values unleashed during the process of transition into concrete and viable institutions. The degree and nature of this challenge varies from country to country.

Summary of Recommendations

The new wave of democracy is an important and positive development in South Asia with far-reaching consequences. Its fragility and vulnerability call for concerted efforts at both the domestic and the international levels to help sustain it and build viable and enduring institutions and processes. The problem with the EU's commitment to democracy is that it has, under strategic pressure, made compromises with the US position. Nor is the EU seen as a cohesive political entity, as its member states have varying degrees of commitment when it comes to promoting human rights and democratic values in various parts of the developing world.

It is accepted by the EU that democracies are not imposed or imported from outside. They evolve on the basis of historical and cultural contexts, political legacies and socio-economic conditions. In the European context, civil society institutions have become robust and vibrant and this leads to the assumption, in relation to the developing world, that the state is in conflict with people and their interests. To weaken or bypass the state may not be the best way of approaching the people in regions like South Asia. The failure of governance often arises from the distortions and vulnerabilities of the

state. The EU can share its historical experience and best practices in this respect, but without making them preconditions for development assistance. As far as possible, this assistance should be disbursed in collaboration and coordination with the recipient state, rather than by bypassing it through the use of NGOs. There is a need to change the character of the state not to weaken it. The state in fact needs to be strengthened if it is to be made more responsive – irrespective of the ideology of the regime in power.

There has been a considerable emphasis on poverty alleviation programmes in the EU's aid package to South Asia and other regions. While poverty alleviation is required in developing countries, it does not have a *necessary* correlation with democracy building. Where such programmes occur, the emphasis needs to be on economic empowerment and access to means of earning a living in the long run. Human rights are an essential component of democratic structures but you do not build or strengthen democracy by protecting human rights on an individual basis. Emphasis should be on supporting the creation of human rights institutions, like the establishment of National Human Rights Commissions, robust rule of law and a dynamic media.

The areas for the international community to help in South Asia are spreading of awareness, institutionalization of democratic norms and practices, including at the level of political parties and civil society organizations, and delivering development through good governance. The international community is already engaged in some of these areas.

1. Introduction

The South Asian region has experienced a democratic resurgence in the recent past while other regions of the world were suffering setbacks. According to the 2008 *Freedom House Annual Report* (Freedom House 2008), 34 countries performed poorly on the indicators of freedom and only 14 showed improvement compared to 2007.¹ In South East Asia, Myanmar continues to frustrate democratic aspirations and even in Thailand political developments have not been conducive to the healthy and sustained growth of democracy.

In contrast to these gloomy trends, there has been a marked resurgence of democracy in South Asia. Bhutan started its transition from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy in 2004 and completed the process by electing a legislature and a representative government in 2008. Nepal's 'peoples' movement' (*Jan Andolan-II*) succeeded in 2006, ending the Maoist insurgency, abolishing the monarchy and establishing a republic. An elected Constituent Assembly and a representative government took office in Nepal in August 2008. In Pakistan, general elections were held for a National Assembly and the military regime was forced to retreat. In September 2008, General Musharraf was replaced as president by Asif Ali Zardari of the Pakistan Peoples' Party. In the Maldives, a multiparty system was introduced in 2005 and in November 2008 a popularly elected president, unseated the former president, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who had been in office consecutively for 30 years. In Bangladesh, after two years of an interim administration, a popular government led by the Awami League came to

¹ The indicators chosen for comparison in the Freedom House survey are Political Rights and Civil Liberties. They are further subdivided into electoral processes, political participation, functioning of the government, freedom of expression and belief, associational and organizational rights, the rule of law, and personal autonomy and individual rights.

power in January 2009. Thus, five of the seven South Asian countries have witnessed a democratic transition in a period of less than three years. The other two South Asian countries, India and Sri Lanka, are established democracies and Afghanistan became a democracy in 2004.

At the international level, India joined global efforts to promote democracy, first, by joining the Community Of Democracies (CD), established in 2000, and then by joining the UN Democracy Fund in 2005 as a founding member.

There have also been democratic failures in South Asia. The democratic credibility of the Karzai regime in Afghanistan and Sri Lanka's Rajapaksa regime has been seriously eroded. Both countries are caught in internal conflicts. Tibet and Myanmar may not be considered part of South Asia but they are very much integral to the overall South Asian political context, particularly since the admission of both China and Myanmar as observers in South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). In Myanmar and Tibet, protests, led by the Monks, in favour of freedom and democracy were crushed in 2007 and 2008, respectively. In sum, all the South Asian countries now have a democratic system. 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.

There have been two critical drivers behind the recent transitions to democracy – the power of the people and the international community.

2. Critical Drivers of Democracy

There have been two critical drivers behind the recent transitions to democracy – the power of the people and the international community. The most impressive demonstration of people power is in Nepal. The Maoists of Nepal had been leading a violent insurgency to establish a republican political order and a socio-economic revolution since 1996. Their strategy underwent a radical shift from violence to a peaceful and democratic struggle. For nearly three weeks in April 2006, around 9 million people took to the streets all over Nepal under the leadership of the Maoists and the Seven Party Alliance (SPA) to agitate peacefully against an autocratic monarchy.

In Pakistan, the elected parliament had since 2002 been asking General Musharraf to rescind the Legal Framework Order (LFO) of 2002, under which he had acquired sweeping powers. However, the decisive turn against the military regime came in March 2007 when Musharraf first suspended and then sacked the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry. This triggered protests from lawyers, who were supported throughout the country by the media, political groups and the general population.

In the cases of Bhutan, the Maldives and Bangladesh, an impression is created that the transition to democracy was a top-down process, and not the direct result of grassroots pressures. In Bhutan, it was the King who initiated the process of change and offered to voluntarily surrender power in favour of representative institutions. However, the King was prompted by the demands of Bhutanese of Nepali ethnic origin who have been asking for political liberalization since mid-1980s, many of whom were politically radicalized by the events in Nepal. The King of Bhutan prudently decided to avoid the path taken by the neighbouring monarch.

In the Maldives, the process of political reform was initiated by President Gayoom in 2004, but his initiative was in reaction to public protests and demands for political change ongoing since 2003. These protests had been sparked by the death of a youth in custody in September 2003 and were sustained and reinforced subsequently by demands for human rights and political liberalization.

In Bangladesh, the interim government had strong backing from the army, which wanted to alter the matrix of power by keeping two of the most powerful party leaders, Sheikh Hasina Wajid of the Awami League and Beghum Khalida Zia of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, out of the political process. The suspicion that the army was creating a permanent position for itself in the political structure continued to loom throughout the interim period of 2007–2008 (International Crisis Group 2008). However, protests against such manoeuvres and the inherent popular strength of the political parties, notwithstanding their intense mutual rivalry and the antipathy of their leaders, prevented this from happening.

Another notable aspect of the new democratic wave in South Asia is the role of civil society.

Another notable aspect of the new democratic wave in South Asia is the role of civil society. Political parties have primary responsibility for mobilizing the masses in democratic struggles. In South Asia, however, in the two critical cases of Nepal and Pakistan, while the political parties were still confused and lacked the confidence to take on the autocratic rulers, civil society groups came forcefully forward to sustain the democratic struggle.

Box 1. The Role of Civil Society in Nepal

In Nepal, leaders of political parties were either arrested or forced underground. Before this, the political parties had been vying with each other to seek royal favour. Civil society groups that had earlier been mobilizing popular support against the Maoist violence now took an active role in mobilizing political resistance to the King's autocratic moves, strengthening the Citizens' Movement for the Restoration of Democracy, and evolving a consensus among the mainstream parties and between them and the Maoists. They also worked to establish links with the international community. (Devraj Dahal 2006; Saubhagya Shah 2008). Leadership in this respect was provided by intellectuals and the media.

Unfortunately, after the victory of the people's movement in April 2006, Nepal's civil society movement proved less effective at keeping the political parties on track in their promised establishment of inclusive democracy. For the parties and their leaders, the struggle for power seems to have taken priority over their promised commitment to build a new democratic Nepal. The civil society movement has also been internally weakened by differences among their leadership over their role as watchdog over the political parties. The media, however, continues to highlight the failures of the political class and, in turn, suffers the state's wrath.

In the case of Pakistan, the political parties were willing to play by the rules defined by the military regime and President General Musharraf. The Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP) even struck a deal with the military to let General Musharraf continue as civilian President in return for the dropping of corruption charges against its leader and a power sharing agreement. It was the lawyers who put up a stiff resistance on the question of the independence of the judiciary and the restoration of the arbitrarily sacked judges. This resistance then gathered political support from the Pakistan Muslim League headed by Nawaz Sharif (PML-N) and subsequently also from the PPP. Gradually,

the lawyers' resistance sparked a robust political movement for the removal of General Musharraf. Thus the lawyers' group took the lead as a civil society group in strengthening the movement for the restoration of democracy. The Asian Human Rights Commission described the lawyers' movement as the "vanguard of democracy" (Statement, March 2008). Years of military rule in Pakistan had not allowed much scope for civil society groups. Women's rights groups had protested against the military regime and been imprisoned and harassed. The media also constructively used the freedom it gained under the military regime to voice support for democracy (S.Akbar Zaidi 2008).

Civil society did not play a role in the process of democratization in Bhutan. The opening up of the system did allow for the proliferation of some media voices, through which democracy was supported and differing viewpoints were cautiously voiced. In the Maldives, the struggle for democracy was sparked, as is noted above, by the death in custody of a young boy. The principal role in raising the issue and carrying it forward, however, was played by those who had been alienated from the Gayoom regime. Civil Society groups either did not exist or were dependent on the regime (Minivan News 28 July 2005; UNHCR 2007). However, the pressure for democratization gathered momentum once the reform process had been initiated and political parties were legalized. In Bangladesh, although civil society groups and a plethora of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) argued for democracy, none really opposed the caretaker government and its efforts to change the contours of the party structure and political dynamics (ICG Report 2008). In Bangladesh, credit must go to the political parties that could hold on to their support bases, particularly with the help of their respective student/youth constituencies, against severe odds.

The international community played a decisive role in most of the democratizing South Asian countries. The role of the international community in Nepal and Pakistan was significant. After 2002, when King Gyanendra of Nepal moved to curb democratic processes, the international community, particularly India, the USA and the EU, tried to restrain him. External responses, however, evolved gradually from persuading the King to restore democratic processes to eventually supporting his opponents in overthrowing him. The Indian Prime Minister had personally assured him that if he took steps to reverse his decisions, arms supply and other assistance would be restored (*Indian Express* 29 April, 2005). Notwithstanding the nuanced differences and varying points of emphases in their respective approaches, the USA and the EU, including the United Kingdom, generally followed India's lead. When India became frustrated its diplomacy moved to facilitate the united front between the SPA and the Maoists.² A 12-point understanding between the SPA and the Maoists was concluded in India in November 2005 to launch a joint peaceful struggle for the removal of the autocratic monarchy and establish 'absolute democracy' in Nepal (*Kathmandu Post*

The role of the international community in Nepal and Pakistan was to stand for democracy in both these countries, but without a complete break with the past authoritarian regimes. However, when, under the pressure of popular movements, past regimes were thrown out, the international community quickly accepted the radical change and proceeded to work with the new regimes.

² The Seven Party Alliance was formed in Nepal in May 2005 to oppose the King's takeover. It demanded the restoration of the dissolved parliament. The Parties that joined this alliance were: the Nepali Congress Party, the Nepali Congress (Democratic) Party, the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist), the Nepal Workers and Peasants' Party, the Nepal Sadbhawana Party (A), the United Left Front and the People's Front. The Royalist parties did not join this alliance.

22 November, 2005). The USA and many EU member states were not enthusiastic about giving legitimacy to the Maoists, but went along with it.

In Pakistan, the international community did not have much to do with the lawyers' movement. However, it accepted General Musharraf's removal and quickly adjusted to the new civilian President. The role of the international community in Nepal and Pakistan was to stand for democracy in both these countries, but without a complete break with the past authoritarian regimes. However, when, under the pressure of popular movements, past regimes were thrown out, the international community quickly accepted the radical change and proceeded to work with the new regimes.

In the Maldives and Bhutan, the international community supported political reform and a transition to democracy. The USA and the UK strongly supported the establishment of the interim government in Bangladesh and its initial moves to purge politics of corrupt political leaders (ICG Report 2008). The international community also discouraged any attempt by the Bangladesh Army to seek a political role for itself in the new arrangements. International support proved to be a key factor in the interim government's efforts to hold free and fair elections in December 2008.

3. A Fragile Institutional Base and Vulnerable Democratic Processes

As is noted above, the democratic transition in South Asia could not have succeeded without the rise of people's power and the support extended by the international community. Despite its radical character, the democratic transition that has taken place

in South Asia is still fragile. The main challenge that the new wave of democracy faces is its consolidation; that is, the translation of the aspirations and values unleashed during the process of transition into concrete and viable institutions. The degree and nature of this challenge vary from country to country.

In Nepal and Pakistan the consolidation of democratic transition faces major hurdles. In Nepal, a new democratic state has to be built on the debris of a 250-year old

monarchical order. It took Nepal two years to hold elections to a Constituent Assembly. Even after the elections, the assumption of office by the elected government was delayed by over three months by political wrangling. The Constituent Assembly must frame a new constitution for an inclusive democracy within a period of two years, but there are signs that seriousness and commitment are lacking. The political parties have initiated processes to decide their respective internal positions on critical constitutional issues. The Maoists have their own draft constitution that indicates where they stand on critical aspects of the nature of the system, the distribution of powers, the character of federalism, and so on. The framing of federal principles and the devolution of powers, and the structure of executive, that is, whether it should be a presidential or a parliamentary system, are the two most problematic issues. Many political leaders worry that a federal structure will result in the disintegration of the Nepali state (International Crisis Group 2007a and 2007b). There is also resistance from Hindu fundamentalists to the new state being secular in character.

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The integration of the Maoist armed cadres into the national armed forces is a further complication. The Nepal Army, supported by sections of the political parties, is resisting this integration, ignoring the fact that it was accepted in principle as a part of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). The peace process in Nepal will not come to its logical conclusion until the CPA is honestly and sincerely implemented by all the parties. There are several issues related to the CPA that need urgent attention, such as the restoration of the properties occupied by the Maoists during the insurgency, the role of the Maoist armed cadres and its youth wing, reconstruction and rehabilitation of all those affected by the internal conflict, the questions of truth and reconciliation, impunity and the rule of law, press freedom, human rights and the democratic functioning of political parties and, above all, the questions of governance and economic development.

In Pakistan, the basic constitutional structure remains, along with the distortions introduced during military rule. The agreement between the two mainstream parties on dismantling the concentrated powers of the presidency has not been implemented. Similarly, the independence of the judiciary has not been fully restored. There are vast areas in the frontier regions where the writ of the government does not run effectively. Religious extremism continues to thrive on poverty and ignorance. Although the army has been institutionally withdrawn from politics and is seen to be backing the civilian government, it continues to wield enormous power when it comes to critical issues of security, foreign policy and even the domestic power structure (Shuja Nawaz 2008).

There are two factors behind the fragility of democratic processes and institutions in Nepal and Pakistan. One is that the initial political consensus built around the struggle for democratization has been eroded under the pressures of the struggle for power. The consensus for building a new Nepal that brought the SPA and the Maoists together has lost its gelling power because the other mainstream parties have been unable to accept the emergence of the Maoists as the strongest political force in the elections to the Constituent Assembly. Consensus has also broken down inside each of the political parties – including the Maoists. In the scramble for power, promises and commitments have lost their meaning. There are also new claimants to power, as is evident from the rise of the Madhesh parties and ethnic (*janjati*) groups. In Pakistan, the coalitions at the forefront of bringing about the democratic transition have also fallen apart. The crisis was precipitated by the court's disqualification of the Sharif brothers from holding public office. They called for a 'long march' and forced President Zardari to accede to their demands for a restoration of the independence of judiciary and a reversal of the court's decision against them.

The second factor is that those ousted from power in the process of democratic transition have continued to work to discredit the newly emerged democratic forces. The King in Nepal initially kept a low profile but has started to become politically active. The army in Nepal, which was loyal to the Monarchy, is not willing to subordinate itself to the elected Maoist leadership and is obstructing the proposed integration of Maoist armed cadres. In Pakistan, the army continues to be perceived as the real source of power, the latest example being Pakistan's refusal to send the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) Chief

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to India.³ It is also reported that US pressure on Pakistan's counterterrorism policy is dividing the army and the civilian leadership. The possibility of the army stepping up its interference in political affairs and even staging a return to direct politics cannot be ruled out. Some analysts believe that General Musharraf may not be averse to returning to active politics, and he has publicly stated his willingness to be the president again (*Hindustan Times*, 9 and 12 March, 2009).

Democratic institutions and norms will evolve gradually in the other South Asian countries that have experienced the new democratic wave. Bhutan has taken only a preliminary step towards democratization. Institutions such as political parties and a free press will take time and effort to mature. Awareness will grow only gradually among the people at large of democratic norms and practices, and rights and obligations. The more open political system in Bhutan should keep pace with rising expectations. In the Maldives, democratic institutions may consolidate faster under the dynamic

leadership of new representatives, but the outgoing President still has considerable support in the existing legislature and bureaucracy. In Bangladesh, the people have expressed a clear choice in choosing their new rulers. The ruling Awami League and its leader, Hasina Wajid, must make sure that their priorities are organized and avoid revenge and rancour⁴ at the cost of constructively building a secular and functional democracy to effectively address the genuine aspirations of the people. The mutiny staged by the Bangladesh Rifles raises the question of civil-military relations, which can easily disrupt democratic processes.

The challenge to democracy in both the new wave and established democracies in South Asia is manifold. It arises from primordial values and identities, such as caste, religion and region, basic political loyalties and mobilization. Fragile, nascent democratic institutions must deliver development that can meet the unfolding aspirations of the people.

The challenge to democracy in both the new wave and established democracies in South Asia is manifold. It arises from primordial values and identities, such as caste, religion and region, basic political loyalties and mobilization. Fragile, nascent democratic institutions must deliver development that can meet the unfolding aspirations of the people. A formidable threat is posed by rising extremism and terrorism in South Asia,

which are fast destroying democratic values and institutions in the region. No South Asian country is free from this threat. The international community, which helped the new wave of democracies to emerge, seems to have relapsed into its self-centred strategic perspectives in dealing with the challenges of democracy in South Asia.

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³ In his first telephone conversation with the Indian Prime Minister, Pakistan's Prime Minister, Yusuf Raza Gilani, promised to send the Chief of the ISI to India to help investigate the Pakistani roots of the terrorist attacks. However, within 48 hours, after the Army Chief General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani's talks with the President and Prime Minister, this decision was reversed. It is believed that the Army General had reservations about the ISI Chief being sent to India. (*redfii NEWS*, 29 November 2008; *The Dawn*, 29 November 2008 (Karachi, Pakistan))

⁴ The revenge and rancour of the Awami League in Bangladeshi politics stems from Prime Minister Hasina Wajid's commitment to punish the perpetrators of the August 1975 coup in which her father and the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Shaikh Mujibur Rahman, was assassinated along with many members of his family.

4. Democratization and Regional Cooperation

The new democratic wave in South Asia is bound to give impetus to the process of regional cooperation and integration both within and beyond the frame work of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). There are two ways in which the democratic drive in South Asia will add to this momentum. First, the spread and consolidation of democracy in South Asia bridge the democratic divide that existed between India and its neighbours. The forces of democracy drew spontaneous and natural support and sympathy from India, both officially and at the popular levels, in their respective struggles against authoritarian regimes. The spillover of such struggles generated tensions and contradictions in intra-regional and bilateral relations, which in turn adversely affected the regional cooperation process. The monarchies and military regimes surrounding India found India's democratic order a threat to their stability and perpetuation. The spillover of internal turmoil into India also affected the overall context of regional relations, including cooperation through SAARC. Most of the democratic dissidents in neighbouring countries have sought shelter in and support from India against their respective authoritarian regimes. The Nepalese monarchy often mobilized anti-Indian nationalism to suppress its democratic opponents by dubbing them Indian agents (Muni 1992, Louise Brown 1996, Upreti 2003). When King Gyanendra assumed direct power, the 2005 SAARC summit was postponed to express India's concern about setbacks to democracy in Nepal. The military regimes in Pakistan have legitimized their control of polity in the name of threats from India and often tied SAARC cooperation, including trade, with the resolution of the Kashmir issue. SAARC has suffered on account of the spillover of internal conflicts between India and Sri Lanka (1990) and also between India and Bangladesh (1992). Democratic politics in South Asia will not result in perfect political harmony in the region, but the democratization of all the SAARC countries will facilitate a broader political understanding among the regimes, creating a better atmosphere for negotiated and mutually advantageous resolutions to disputes and driving enhanced economic and social cooperation.

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Second, democratic regimes depend on popular endorsement for their legitimacy. People in the region aspire to development and better life conditions and want greater people-to-people exchanges, freer movement across borders, peace and economic growth. Countries have to cooperate to achieve these ends, and SAARC is the only regional mechanism for promoting such cooperation. Democratic regimes will find it politically rewarding to pursue development issues through implementation of the SAARC agenda. Greater and more active participation by the people, enabled and encouraged by democratic systems, boost productivity and development (International IDEA 2008). Greater cooperation would also energize business constituencies in support of the respective democratic regimes in South Asia. Even the Maoists leaders of Nepal, after their popular endorsement in the Constituent Assembly elections, have started to talk about economic revolution in a liberal framework (*Kathmandu Post*; 16 April 2008; *The Rising Nepal*, (Kathmandu) 20 September 2008). Such measures are bound to contribute positively to the dynamics of regional cooperation and radically improve bilateral relations between India and Nepal.

In recent years, people at the grass roots level in India and Pakistan have called for greater bilateral cooperation. The 2005 earthquake in Kashmir generated open popular calls in Pakistan to accept India's help with rescue and reconstruction efforts. The opening up of political space and freedom of expression give voice to businesses on both sides that favour cooperation. Pakistan's relationship with India is key to the growth of SAARC. A democratic Pakistan has indicated a greater enthusiasm for improving both economic and political relations with India.

An important feature of the SAARC process has been the adoption of the SAARC Development Goals (SDG) and the SAARC Social Charter at the 2004 summit in Islamabad. The SDGs are divided into four categories: (a) livelihood – eradication of hunger and poverty, empowerment of the poor, women and children, and affordable justice; (b) health – maternal, child and public health; (c) education – primary education and universal literacy; and (d) the environment – forest cover, water, air and soil quality, biodiversity and hazardous waste. The Social Charter places people at the

centre of development and aims to promote 'participatory governance, human dignity, social justice and solidarity at national, regional and global levels' (SAARC Social Charter: art.II, 2.1 and 2.vi). The Charter highlights the goals of poverty alleviation, health, human resource development, the rights of women and children, population stabilization and tackling drug addiction.

Following the democratization of South Asia, a greater emphasis has been placed in SAARC meetings on the implementation of the SAARC Development Goals and the Social Charter.

The SDGs, the Social Charter and the democratization processes in South Asia are mutually reinforcing. South Asian civil society has come forward to expand and strengthen the Social Charter by introducing a 'Citizen's Social Charter' that includes democratic and human rights (Sobhan 2005). Following the democratization of South Asia, a greater emphasis has been placed in SAARC meetings on the implementation of the SDGs and the Social Charter. The adoption of the Charter of the SAARC Development Fund at the Colombo Summit in August 2008 was a significant move. This fund will expedite the implementation of the SDGs and the Social Charter objectives, although some of the SDGs, such as halving the proportion of people in poverty by 2010, will be extremely difficult to achieve.

5. The Role of the European Union and the International Community

The new wave of democracy is an important and positive development in South Asia with far-reaching consequences. Its fragility and vulnerability call for concerted efforts at both the domestic and the international levels to help sustain it and build viable and enduring institutions and processes. Important sections of the international community, particularly India, the USA and some EU member states, played a supportive role. This

role will need to be continued in order to stabilize and sustain the processes of democratization, reinforce democratic aspirations and values, and institutionalize them into firm and durable structures of inclusive political decision-making, economic development and social evolution.

In building and sustaining democracy in South Asia, the EU has a special position.

In building and sustaining democracy in South Asia, the EU has a special position. Other members of the international community have looked at the question in strategic

terms. The EU has had a policy of greater engagement with South Asia in the context of building democracy since 2004. Its members, especially the Scandinavian countries and Switzerland, are perceived as ideal examples of humane and democratic governance. The problem with the EU's commitment to democracy is that it has, under strategic pressure, made compromises with the US position. Nor is the EU seen as a cohesive political entity, as its member states have varying degrees of commitment when it comes to promoting human rights and democratic values in various parts of the developing world.

It is accepted by the EU that democracies are not imposed or imported from outside. They evolve on the basis of historical and cultural contexts, political legacies and socio-economic conditions. The EU should therefore avoid its own ideological baggage while committing itself to democracy building. In the European context, civil society institutions have become robust and vibrant and this leads to the assumption, in relation to the developing world, that the state is in conflict with people and their interests. To weaken or bypass the state may not be the best way of approaching the people in regions like South Asia. The failure of governance often arises from the distortions and vulnerabilities of the state. The EU can share its historical experience and best practices in this respect, but without making them preconditions for development assistance. As far as possible, this assistance should be disbursed in collaboration and coordination with the recipient state, rather than by bypassing it through the use of NGOs. There is a need to change the character of the state not to weaken it. The state in fact needs to be strengthened if it is to be made more responsive – irrespective of the ideology of the regime in power. If a Maoist party or a religious group has come to power through a genuine democratic process and enjoys popular support, that government should be supported without any attempt to undermine or discredit its leadership.

In the European context, civil society institutions have become robust and vibrant and this leads to the assumption, in relation to the developing world, that the state is in conflict with people and their interests. To weaken or bypass the state may not be the best way of approaching the people in regions like South Asia. The failure of governance often arises from the distortions and vulnerabilities of the state.

The international community in general and the EU in particular will, through intensive interaction with each of the forces representing democratic transition, need to find out precisely what is required and how best it can be provided (Mackie and Zinke 2006). While preparing packages of development and other assistance, members of the international community should learn from the Swedish experience of listening to recipients' requests and assessing real need (Boolin 2007). A country-by-country approach is required when it comes to specifics.

There has been a considerable emphasis on poverty alleviation programmes in the EU's aid package to South Asia and other regions. While poverty alleviation is required in developing countries, it does not have a *necessary* correlation with democracy building. Where such programmes occur, the emphasis needs to be on economic empowerment and access to means of earning a living in the long run. The 'basic needs' approach, is good for meeting contingencies and special requirements on a time-limited basis.

While poverty alleviation is required in developing countries, it does not have a necessary correlation with democracy building.

A number of Western NGO's are involved with support from the EU in the protection and promotion of human rights. This raises questions of political rights and freedoms,

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which again may keep pressure on the regimes that are violating and ignoring the human rights of their people. Human rights are an essential component of democratic structures but you do not build or strengthen democracy by protecting human rights on an individual basis. Emphasis should be on supporting the creation of human rights institutions – like the establishment of National Human

Rights Commissions, robust rule of law and a dynamic media. Selecting prisoners of conscience is welcome, but the role of such efforts in building or sustaining democracies is limited and marginal.

Each democratizing South Asian country has its own challenges to face. In general, the primary need of nascent democracies in South Asia is the reinforcement of democratic values and aspirations. The areas for the international community to help in South Asia are spreading of awareness, institutionalization of democratic norms and practices, including at the level of political parties and civil society organizations, and delivering development through good governance. The international community is already engaged in some of these areas. The cost of not doing so will be chaos and conflict in one of the world's most populous regions, which is keen to remain democratic.

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