The state of democracy in South Asia

Maya Chadda

Home to a quarter of the world’s population, South Asia represents a unique and grand experiment in economy and democracy. The story of democracy begins at different points in the history of the seven states that make up South Asia. Its path has been, however, far from smooth. Everywhere, democratic development has been interrupted by strife, civil wars, and illegitimate usurpation of power by illiberal forces. Even in India, which is generally acknowledged to be a unique and enduring example of a stable democracy among postcolonial developing countries, state elections have been deferred time and again awaiting the return of law and order. In 1975, India was under a proclamation of national emergency, and scheduled national elections were postponed until 1977. Still, derailed democracies are not unusual in postcolonial countries that embarked as independent nations following the end of World War II. Even among these, the South Asian experience is arguably special.

What makes it so? To begin with, the region has been home to the Indus Valley Civilization, one of the oldest civilizations in the world, going back to 3000 B.C. It expanded and changed by absorbing a multiplicity of local and extra-regional influences and ideas over the passage of the centuries. This civilizational motif was shaped by and, in turn, shaped the histories of regions that make up the individual countries of South Asia. Second, South Asia has been subject to many invasions from beyond its natural geographical boundaries and has as a result witnessed the rise and fall of several great empires. The last such empire was the British India, which included what we today know as the countries of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. These parallel strands of indigenous and foreign cultures have been woven together to create South Asia’s third special characteristic: namely, its astounding diversity of religion, language, ethnicity, and endogamous caste groups. These divisions have produced a social structure that was segmented in which each segment was identified with some combination of language, location, and lifestyles. For example, West Bengal in India and adjoining Bangladesh are primary locations for the Bengali-speaking ethnic community that is distinguishable by language, food habits, and lifestyles from the Tamils in the region of Tamil Nadu. The latter was home to the kingdom of the Pandyas, Pallavas, and the Cholas at one time and gave the people living in these parts a definitive cultural identity. The same is true of Bengal. But no one associates Bengalis with the Tamil region in South India. However, the most ubiquitous identities in South Asia are the endogamous extended family grouping
The state of democracy in South Asia

called Jatis, roughly translated as castes. These are quite unique to the region, although the divisions they have created are not uniformly rigid across the region.

Fourth, the British colonized almost all the countries in South Asia, except Nepal. The Colonial rule brought in Western ideologies and political structures. These were gradually grafted on to a partially reformed social and economic order that the colonial rule created over the roughly 150 years of expanding colonization. When the British colonial occupation ended in 1947, it left behind a mixed legacy. Several parts of the region had been incorporated in the British global trade and hence were relatively more modernized than other parts that formed a part of the British India. The British had introduced Western education, built a fairly efficient system of administration, and established several legal and political institutions that were modern in contrast to the other parts they did not directly rule, namely the princely kingdoms, the border zones, and a lot of the rural areas. In these parts, modernization remained at a rudimentary level. While these developments were arguably a ‘good thing’, other British legacies were indisputably damaging. On the eve of their departure, they had partitioned the subcontinent on the basis of religion and consigned it thereby to a permanent history of internecine warfare and civil violence. They had also left behind ill-defined borders.

The partition of the British India in 1947 led to wars between the newly created nations of India and Pakistan and over the years poisoned all efforts at regional cooperation. The costs in blood and treasure, not to mention distorted national priorities, that these conflicts produced have diverted resources from national integration, reduction of poverty, and building a stable and robust democracy.

Nations of South Asia have aspired but found daunting challenges of national integration and political consolidation that frequently set back their efforts to move from independence to a stable democracy. This is largely because the Western colonial notions of a liberal democracy have presumed a state that is fully consolidated, politically well integrated, and in possession of a stable market economy. The countries in South Asia hardly resembled this ideal when they embarked on their path to democracy. That they have failed in this endeavor is not then surprising. What is surprising is that democracy succeeded in the largest subcontinental country among them, which accounts for close to 75 percent of population. Democracy took roots and endured in India, despite wars, poverty, and setbacks.

South Asia also inherited porous boundaries and contested ethno-national identities that frequently spilled over across the disputed borders. The Bengalis in India’s state of West Bengal share more in common with the neighboring Bangladesh than with the neighboring province of Bihar. Punjabis on both sides of the India-Pakistan border speak the same language and share a common ethnic history. Any notion of a greater Punjab, presumably combining the Punjabi-speaking areas on both sides of the border, will threaten the national unity of both India and Pakistan. Turmoil and insurgency on one side of the border—let us say in Nepal—can easily spill over into Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and other adjoining areas of India and jeopardize the principle state function of the Indian central government, namely maintaining law and order. The goals of building a European-style Westphalian state have therefore eluded the leaders in South Asia. But that has not dampened their ardor to build one.

It is against this background that the story of South Asia’s democracy has slowly unfolded. This chapter provides an overview of the region’s journey to democracy and the kind of challenges the five contiguous countries of the subcontinent have faced. These are India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. The last shares territorial waters with India. And while India and Pakistan were created out of the first division of British India in 1947, Sri Lanka was granted independence in 1948, and Bangladesh became a separate state.
twenty-five years later in 1972, well past the division of 1947. Nepal was never colonized and has remained a separate entity since the mid-18th century.

I will outline how and why state consolidation has undermined democracy, although the obverse is not true in every instance. In India and Sri Lanka, and even in Pakistan, democracy has contributed to the nation-building project. It is nevertheless worthy of note that competitive elections have been a cause of instability as well. The first section of this chapter delineates the story of democracy around key developments; the second examines the main causes for its failure, followed by a brief commentary on South Asia’s democratic future in the third section.

**Democratization in South Asia**

**India**

With the achievement of independence in 1947, India declared itself a democracy. As a new nation, it had to first establish an independent sovereign government, free from colonial domination. This task was achieved by transition of the Indian National Congress (INC) party, which since 1855 had led the movement for India’s political freedom, to become eventually the majority political party in a Constituent Assembly set up by the British colonial authority in 1935. At the time of independence, the Congress party formed an interim government, with its leader, Jawaharlal Nehru, serving as prime minister. With the adoption of the constitution in January 1950, the Republic of India became a democratic secular nation.1 It was able to make this transition fairly smoothly, despite the devastating consequences of the partition that had plunged the country into a religious bloodbath and war with Pakistan.2 There were at least three key reasons for India’s rapid turnaround to stability: availability of a capable and well-educated leadership that was committed not only to the country’s unity, independence, and development but also rich in experience of the democratic governance, albeit at the provincial level. The British Raj had accommodated to the Congress party’s demand to contest elections at the local level and participate in the management of provincial governance. This experience, not to mention the technique of popular mobilization and management learnt while negotiating with the British authorities on all manner of public interest issues, proved invaluable when the Congress assumed the mantle of power following the first national election in 1952.

Second, India was fortunate to inherit from the British Raj the bulk of the all-India civil service and armed forces.3 These organizations were disciplined and had gathered a rich body of experience in administration and management under the British. The Indian armed forces remained subservient to the civilian authority and, unlike those in Pakistan, harbored no political ambitions of their own.

Last but not least, India’s prominent Congress leaders were steeped in the ideas of liberal democracy, and their personal prestige and popularity provided the leverage they needed to sideline or crush any opposition to it.4 The INC5 dominated the political space in these early years, while the extreme left (the communist party of India) and extreme right (the Hindu nationalists) lost popular support. These three elements were important in stabilizing India after the wrenching partition of 1947. Its subsequent political story can be divided into four broad periods.

**The first phase: 1947–1967**

The early challenge created by the partition and the communal holocaust was followed in the early 1950s by a clamor by India’s ethnic communities to reorganize its union along
The state of democracy in South Asia

ethnolinguistic lines. It was the first test of the Congress party’s ability to cope with the demands of ethnic nationalism and the first pan-Indian challenge to achieve national integration within a democratic framework. The government of Nehru created a State Reorganization Commission, an autonomous and independent body to carry out an impartial study and come up with recommendations of a federal design best suited to India. This could have been a highly partisan exercise, but it was saved from being so because of the leadership’s adherence to democratic process and transparency demanded of the Commission. Based on the Commission’s recommendation, the Indian union was federated in 1956 along the ethnolinguistic lines.

Had the Congress government of Prime Minister Nehru failed to meet the challenge of ethnic nationalism, India could have broken apart into many separate entities. The Indian leaders had not only transformed a unitary India into a federal state but had done so by evolving a standard criterion that was acceptable to the majority in the nation. It did leave out decisions on the Sikh, Naga, and Telangana demands for separate states, but in each instance, the central government was able to offer persuasive reasons for the postponement. The Sikh demand was based on religion, and that could not be countenanced in a secular India. The Nagas had declared a war against the Indian state, and the Indian army was engaged in subduing the separatist movement. In any event, it would have been difficult to draw a provincial line that included all the various Naga subcommunities within a proposed Nagaland. A separate Telangana could not be created since there were no linguistic or cultural distinctions between the Telugu-speaking populations of Andhra and Telangana. The latter was a part of the Andhra Pradesh at that time. Thus, resolving the fiercely fought battles over ethnic demarcations over culture and ethnicity within a democratic framework not only deepened Indian democracy but arguably made it more stable.

There was also the challenge of extreme poverty, destitution, and widespread hunger. These required a comprehensive economic strategy for rural and urban development. India opted for a quasi-socialist, mixed economy model and placed the state at the center of all the nation-building efforts. The private sector could operate but strictly within a space regulated by the state. The lead role of the state in the production and regulation of the nation’s economic life reinforced and augmented the power of the central state and the Congress party that dominated India’s political life. The concentration of administrative and regulatory power bloated the bureaucracy and adversely affected efficiency. Accumulated regulatory power led to widespread corruption among its ranks. But in the early 1950s and 1960s, the state was the great provider of law and order, democratic choice, and a stable nation.

Developments beyond India’s border posed yet another challenge. India wished to keep the Cold War at bay, but in 1955, Pakistan entered into a defense pact with the US. This aggravated India-Pakistan animosities immensely and led to two wars in the following two decades. Dispute over the border with China added to India’s defense burden and made its entire northeast potentially vulnerable to Chinese attacks. Observers within and outside India began to predict that it was likely to break up under these converging pressures from within and without.

This did not happen. The state survived all the difficulties, the partition, poverty, wars, droughts, and famines. So did democracy. India continued to routinely return elected government to power. There were no coups or military takeovers, and it did not turn to a dictatorship. The key reason for this early success was the dominance of the Congress party, which functioned both as a vehicle of popular sentiments and mechanism to reconcile ideological and policy differences. The party’s dominance was derived from the lead role it had played in the nationalist struggle for independence. The INC stood for a broad national consensus that
defused potential conflicts and permitted the nation to accumulate the experience of democratic governance. In fact, as an umbrella party, the Congress contained many adversarial and opposite opinions and factions within its body, but its centralized structure prevented fragmentation until the death of the first prime minister. Other developing nations that achieved independence after World War II are generally less fortunate in this regard.

Rapid establishment of economic and political institutions was the second reason why Indian democracy was sustained. It is difficult to exaggerate the institution-building achievements of these early years and the organizational frame and ideological coherence the INC provided. Each was a factor in making India stable and its nation increasingly compatible with its state.

The second phase: Indira era

But what had worked in the first phase became counterproductive in the second. As democracy expanded, Congress faced challenges to its electoral dominance, especially at the state level. It had hoped that the federal reorganization of 1956 would contain ethnic aspirations for self-rule and autonomy. But this did not happen. The INC splintered as many leaders left to create new state-level political formation that was more in line with the subunit’s ethnic makeup. The Indira Gandhi period (from 1968 to 1977 and then again from 1980 to 1984) witnessed the birth of many state-level parties that became the voice of regional, caste, and ethnic nationalism. The Akalis in Punjab and Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and All India Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK and AIDMK) in Tamil Nadu are cases in point. While democracy expanded, the goals of poverty reduction and rapid growth remained beyond reach. India’s rural poor, who constituted its vast majority, suffered from hunger and malnourishment.

Indira Gandhi responded to these challenges by tightening the central state’s control over the economy: nationalizing the Banks and tightening bureaucratic control over the market, industry, and commerce. Control over industry and commerce was complimented with subsidies to the poor and the creation of quotas popularly known as ‘reservations’ for the backward castes and untouchables, who constituted the bulk of India’s poor. But there was no visible reduction in poverty over these years. The bureaucracies at the center and state levels, however, expanded enormously during Indira Gandhi’s tenure.

The INC continued to lose voter bases to local parties. The creeping authoritarian tendencies attributed to the Indira Gandhi years can be traced to the erosion of the Congress party beginning in the late 1960s. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi arbitrarily dismissed state-level opposition governments to preserve the INC’s dominance, which initially led to protests and resistance. But resistance soon morphed into violent insurgencies in the border regions of India, namely Punjab, Kashmir, Assam, and Nagaland. The Congress’ quest for monopolizing power, albeit within the limits of the constitution, undermined national integration and provided adjacent countries, Pakistan in particular, an opportunity to meddle in India’s domestic conflicts.

The period of the 1980s coincided with the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and US-supported insurgency to defeat and evict them. Pakistan played as a proxy to US interests and a conduit to the Afghan mujahedeen fighting the Soviet troops. Many among the five million Afghan refugees who fled to Pakistan were trained, armed, and sent across the border into Afghanistan to wage a Jihad, but similar tactics also brought Pakistan-based infiltration into the Indian Kashmir and to a lesser extent into Punjab. The Pakistan connection hardened the central government against ethnic demands for political autonomy. The Sikh
The state of democracy in South Asia

The state of democracy in South Asia

insurgency in Punjab therefore led to the ‘Operation Blue Star’, meant to clear the Sikh holy shrine in Amritsar of the Sikh extremists. Similarly, the demand for independence led to the deployment of the armed forces in the Indian Kashmir. The ‘Operation Blue Star’ led to revenge killing of Indira Gandhi in November 1984, which unleashed first ever Hindu-Sikh riots and death of thousands of innocent Sikhs all over India. The Indian Kashmir has ever since slipped into periodic violence and mass protests that has the Indian state turn Kashmir valley into a military camp.

Rajiv Gandhi, son and heir to Indira Gandhi, followed with a landslide majority in the 1985 elections, but the sympathy wave that brought him the victory did not stem the erosion of the Congress’s hold over India. The INC lost the 1989 elections to a coalition government. This coalition government, the second since 1947, dissolved within a few months, but it signaled the end to the era of single-party dominance in India. While campaigning for elections, Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated by the Sri Lankan Tamil terrorists who were seeking revenge for deploying the Indian peacekeeping forces in northern Sri Lanka. South Asia’s ethnic extremists had murdered two Indian prime ministers within seven years between 1984 and 1991.

The third phase: weak coalition governments

Following Rajiv Gandhi’s assassination in 1991, the INC had returned to power on a sympathy vote but only as a minority party in a coalition of several state-level parties. While the INC was thus shrinking, the decade of the 1990s brought cataclysmic international change – the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War – and equally dangerous domestic change within India: dispersal of power away from the central state to its regions and subunits; severe balance of payment crisis that exposed the failure of state-led economic strategy; the rise of powerful ethnic- and caste-based groups (demanding state protection in jobs and education); and, last but not least, the rise of Hindu nationalism, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its affiliates, which were determined to replace the INC and its secular and quasi-socialist ideology with their own brand of Hindutva ideology. Each development had the potential to derail the Indian democracy. The collapse of the Soviet Union had cast India adrift in foreign policy; the destabilization of Afghanistan had unleashed radicalized Islamic groups aided and abated by Pakistan’s intelligence agencies that had targeted India, especially its hold over the Indian Kashmir. The economic crisis raised fears of total collapse. Rise of Hindu cultural nationalism threatened to tear India’s social fabric to shreds.

Between 1989 and 1999, several coalition governments were elected. India went to polls three times to change seven governments within those ten years. The transition from a single-party-dominant democracy to weak coalition rule was tumultuous to say the least but instability produced no coup, no rise of a single-party dictatorship, and no strongman to replace the established electoral democracy in India. The coalition governments ushered in a steady dispersal of power away from the central state to its federal subunits, which was arguably a deepened democracy.

Despite short-lived coalition governments, India dismantled the regulatory regime and initiated market-based reforms, redefined its foreign policy, abandoned nuclear reticence to conduct nuclear weapons tests, signed a border agreement to maintain a status quo on border with China, and initiated a ‘look east’ policy to build new security and trade partnerships with Southeast Asia. Democracy had not only transformed India, but it had created a state able to carry forward adjustment and reform in response to global development. Although political uncertainty and short-tenured governments did not permit these policy initiatives
to fully fructify, the dispersal of power had expanded and deepened India’s democratic experiment. In the 1999 elections, the largest democratic exercise ever, 350 million Indians went to polls and gave a plurality of votes to the BJP-led coalition of non-Congress parties.17

The fourth phase: stable coalition governments

The BJP-led coalition retained office until 2004 elections, followed by the Congress-led coalition for two consecutive terms until 2014. In the May 2014 election, over 540 million Indians went to polls to elect the BJP once again, but this time, it was led by Narendra Modi, who had built his political career as a commissar of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (the RSS), a hyper-nationalist organization that envisions India as a nation of ‘Hindus first’. There were other visible signs of change: The Indian voters were no longer content to base their vote on ethnic and cast identity; they demanded performance and good governance.18 This was more than evident in the way in which the second term of the INC under Prime Minister Man Mohan Singh (2004–2009 and then again 2009–2014) became paralyzed by nationwide anti-corruption movement led by a new political party that sought no caste or ethnic affiliation. India was slowly moving away from identity politics to class-based politics. The fourth phase had shown signs of India settling into a two-party system alternating between two broad coalitions led by the Congress and the BJP. But the humiliating decline of the Congress in the 2014 elections and its continued erosion raised the possibility of returning again to a single-party dominance led by the BJP that was committed to the agenda of one country, one culture, and one people. This trend was reconfirmed in the March 2017 state elections in India. In almost all five states, save Punjab, the BJP under Narendra Modi’s leadership swept the polls. While the imperatives of governing a multiethnic nation may constraint the Hindu nationalists, Indian democracy is in the process of working through a new ideological frame – one informed by Hindutva – that has the potential to divide the nation and undermine the individual liberties and human rights especially for its non-Hindu minorities. Close to seven decades of democracy has, however, made elections the only avenue to political office. But this procedural democracy hides a multiplicity of structural flaws and weaknesses that makes it so very different from the template established by Western democracies in Europe and North America, a subject to which I will return for comment in the second section.

Nepal

Nepal was never colonized and had therefore remained trapped in traditional modes of feudal and monarchic rule. The bulk of its population survived by subsistence agriculture, and the court and the Hindu upper castes of Tagadharis (such as the Khatris and Brahmins) exercised power.19 Ruled by Rana dynasty before 1946, Nepal retained its sovereign independence by cooperating with the British in India. Sushila Tyagi describes it as a policy of “friendly isolation”.20 Only after the abolition of the Rana rule in 1951 and restoration of monarchy, with help from the first government of independent India, did Nepal open up to the outside world. The government of Prime Minister Nehru, however, insisted that the king should allow political parties and the Nepali Congress in particular to move the country toward democracy. Chadda observes, “Leaders of Independent India played a key role in these events and persuaded the king to sign an agreement …king, Rana and NC (Nepali Congress party) agreed to share power by democratic mandate”.21 But King Tribhuvan made only half-hearted efforts. These then failed not only because they were perfunctory but also because of Nepal’s feudal and underdeveloped society was ill-suited to installing democracy.
King Mahendra succeeded King Tribhuvan in 1955. Although Mahendra drew up a new constitution that envisaged a popularly elected legislature, he insisted on retaining far-reaching powers, including the right to declare national emergency. In the first ever elections of 1959 under the new constitution, the Nepali Congress won a majority, and its leader, B. P. Koirala, became the prime minister. But the king refused the parliament's bid to carry out land reforms, since land ownership was the primary basis of the feudal classes supporting the monarchy. In December 1960, King Mahendra dismissed the government and arrested Prime Minister Koirala. Two years later, he replaced the nascent democratic system with a 'Panchayat' system, which resembled the guided democracy instituted around the same time by the military rulers in Pakistan. An indirectly elected national-level council stood at the apex of the Panchayat system whose roughly one hundred members pledged loyalty to the king. Criticism of the king was outlawed. Party leaders ran for office but only in their individual capacity.

Democracy got a second chance in 1980 when the king called for a referendum on the Panchayat system. Unable to forge a united front against the monarchy, Nepal's political parties lost the chance to reinstate democracy. Disillusionment with the rampant corruption within the Panchayat was, however, growing. This led to protests, especially in Nepal's urban centers. The political impasse between the king and the people came to a head in 1989–1990, which coincided with India's trade embargo. The economic hardships swelled the ranks of the protesters and led to a mass movement – the Jan Andolan – that demanded return to a democracy and end to the Panchayat system. Unable to stem the tide of popular protests, the king ultimately yielded to the people and declared Nepal a parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarchy.

The years between 1990 and 2005, Nepal witnessed many upheavals and protests, short-lived governments and an effort to build stable political coalition at the center, but each new beginning ended in a dismal failure or was aborted midpoint. There were two broad reasons for these failures: the power struggle between political parties and the monarchy, and conflict among and within political parties. A stable government could not be formed. Ambitious leaders broke away to form new parties or bring down elected governments. For instance, the political left in Nepal split three ways, each giving birth to more and more extreme left parties. The centrist parties, such as the Nepali Congress, could not deliver on any of the promises it made and got bogged down in struggle for the office of the prime minister. Impatient with the nonperformance and broken promises of the centrist parties, people in Nepal increasingly turned to the extremist left, which had launched an insurgency to do away with the monarchy and make Nepal a republic. By November 1999, the extreme left – Maoist – controlled thirty-one of Nepal's seventy-five districts and the violence they had unleashed led to the death of more than a 1,000 people. The number of the Maoists was estimated to be about 5,000–6,000 strong, but they had won many sympathizers.

The Nepali Congress Party (NCP), which formed the government in 1999, offered to negotiate with the Maoists, but nothing came of these talks. Violence escalated in 2000 when insurgents began to attack the police and other agencies of the state. The NCP government called in the army since the police were unable to cope with the Maoists. While the civilian governments were thus besieged, Nepal was thrown into one of the worse political crises since its transformation in 1990. In a fit of drug-induced rage, Prince Dipendra murdered nine members of the royal family, including the king, and then committed suicide in June 2001. The sole surviving member was the unpopular Gyanendra, the brother of the deceased king.

The Maoists rapidly moved to take advantage of the political disarray. Violence increased several fold, while Nepal's cities and towns shut down with mass protests and demonstrations.
Maya Chadda

The Maoists wanted the constitution dissolved and monarchy abolished. Dipendra’s fratricidal violence strengthened their arguments. Violence escalated across Nepal in the following two years. Thousands of civilians died or were injured in the clashes giving King Gyanendra an excuse to declare a state of emergency. Gyanendra’s actions threw the political parties into confusion, since the emergency was an open bid to reclaim power to the monarchy. Democracy suffered a further blow in 2004 when the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN-Maoist) announced the formation of an autonomous people’s government in ten districts under their control. In the three-way struggle between political parties, the monarchy, and the Maoists, Nepal’s democracy seemed forever lost.

The tumult during the subsequent five years – between 2005 and 2011 – altered it even more. The monarchy was abolished; Nepal became a secular republic; and the Maoists signed a peace accord in 2006, contested elections, and formed a government in 2008. But the inclusion of the extreme left into the democratic process was difficult. Most importantly, Nepal’s armed forces refused to accommodate the Maoist cadres in the ranks of the military. The political mobilization of Nepal had now gripped its ethnic minorities in the Terai region and western Nepal. They threatened to derail the constitutional assembly unless it reworked the federal division of power and autonomy along ethnic lines. Charged with drawing up the constitution, the Constituent Assembly had to be dissolved in 2011 and reelected in 2013, but even then, it took them two additional years of negotiations to produce the first draft in 2015. Nepal’s Terai region and hill communities have since then launched an agitation to demand greater share of both federal power and state revenue.

A quarter century after the Jan Andolan in 1990, both stability and democracy elude Nepal. The continuous churning has created new avenues for popular expression, but absence of political consensus on fundamental questions, not to mention lack of institutions to stabilize the consensus, has led to disarray and violence. Nepal’s ideological divide – between the left and the right – is compounded by personal ambitions and party factionalism. Demands of the Madhesis in Terai and tribes in the hills regions have to be accommodated for the constitutions to work and the center to hold. Nepal is yet to create a stable center.

Bangladesh

Present-day Bangladesh was one of the five provinces of Pakistan following the partition in 1947. Over 1,000 miles of Indian territory divided eastern and the four western provinces of Pakistan. Beyond the common bond of Islam however, Pakistan’s five provinces share little in common culture, history, ethnicity, or language. From the very beginning, Pakistan’s two halves were at odds: first, over making Urdu (spoken mostly in West Pakistan) the common national language while neglecting the Bengali spoken by the majority in its eastern half. East Pakistan felt exploited and politically subjugated to the Urdu-speaking elites in West Pakistan. These grievances came to a head when the 1969 elections gave the Awami League (AL), the dominant party in East Pakistan, an electoral majority. The impending possibility of an AL government for Pakistan as a whole was anathema to the power elites in the western half. Pakistan’s military rejected the verdict; AL immediately launched a movement for independence. Pakistan’s military leaders ordered the armed forces to crush the rebellion, which plunged the country into a civil war. The outcome was another partition in South Asia, this time of Pakistan, and the birth of the new nation of Bangladesh.

AL’s top leaders, like Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who became the first prime minister, speedily moved to adopt a new constitution and proceeded to hold the first democratic election in March 1973. Under the 1973 constitution, Bangladesh became a secular republic,
The state of democracy in South Asia

a unitary state and a parliamentary democracy along the Westminster model. Political sta-

bility, however, eluded the government of Prime Minister Mujibur Rahman. He therefore

sought to gather the reins of power by moving to a presidential form and establishing vir-

tually a single-party government in Bangladesh. But even that experiment failed.\textsuperscript{30} Calf

Dowlah comments, “the nation had never experienced such a level and magnitude of unre-

strained bribery, cronyism, political patronage, favoritism, or nepotism ever before”. He

goes on to say,

The worst of the regime, however, came with the launching of the one-party-one-

man monolithic rule under BAKSAL (Bangladesh Krishik Sramik Awami League) in

January 1975, which not only bulldozed the last vestiges of democracy … but also left

no “resistance to” dictatorship without getting rid of Mujibur himself.\textsuperscript{31}

In 1975, Mujibur and his family were assassinated in a military coup led by a group of

Islamist army officers. Martial law was declared and political parties banned. A series of palace

coups took place in the following five years. Between 1977 and 1981, Ziaur Rahman, the

army chief of staff, ruled Bangladesh as a military dictator; in March 1982, Chief of Army

Staff, Lt-Gen. Hussain Muhammad Ershad, seized power in a bloodless coup. While initial

years provided a modicum of support under President Ershad, by 1983, demand for democ-

racy rapidly gained ground. Opposition to the military emerged from two distinct clusters

of political parties: one comprising of eight parties led by the AL headed by Sheikh Hassina

(the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman) and the second a seven-party alliance called the

Bangladesh Nationalist party (BNP) led by Begum Khalida Zia (General Zia’s widow).

As public pressure mounted, President Ershad was forced to concede that elections would

be held in April 1985. These were, however, postponed to allow Ershad to form the Jatiya

Party (JP), a new political party representing his supporters in the armed forces. Elections

were finally held a year later in May 1986. The BNP, however, boycotted the elections.

This gave the JP to score a pyrrhic victory, but its image was tarnished by charges of fraud

and voter intimidation. Anti-government strikes and mass demonstrations immediately fol-

lowed, which gave the new government the justification to declare a national emergency

and detain over 6,000 political dissidents.\textsuperscript{32} Even the AL that had actually contested the 1986

elections walked out of the parliament, which dealt a body blow to the Ershad government.

Martial law was again imposed with orders to shoot protesters on sight. But even this dra-

conian order failed to stem the tide of popular protests. Ershad resigned in December 1990,

bringing to an end fifteen years of military rule in Bangladesh.

The return to electoral politics, however, proved rough as the two rival clusters of parties –
one led by Sheikh Hasina and the other its nemesis, led by Begum Zia – bent their energies

to destroying each other instead of building national consensus on the outstanding problems

facing the nation. Little effort was made to create democratic institutions or to make good on

the promises made to the people. Instead, each engaged in obstructing the business of govern-

ment by refusing to cooperate in the parliament, while the party in power ignored the rule of

law and democratic conventions in anxiety to consolidate its hold on power. The BNP won

the first 1991 elections and passed a constitutional amendment to move back to a parliamen-
tary form making the president a titular head of the government. The AL immediately took

to streets entirely ignoring the parliament. Unable to function, the Khalida Zia government

dissolved the parliament and called for new elections in the hope that the BNP would win.

The 1996 elections brought the AL to power with a plurality. It moved with alacrity
to form a government in coalition with the JP. Sheikh Hasina became the new prime
minister. Since then, democracy in Bangladesh has remained locked between these two intensely hostile parties bent on undoing each other. They have used a whole gamut of extra-parliamentary ploys to this purpose: boycotts, mass demonstration, and mass strikes.33 These have certainly politicized the public but produced no national agreement on the fundamental rules and conduct for a peaceful transfer of power. Although Bangladesh is several steps ahead of Nepal, which has very recently – in 2015 – produced a constitution and is yet to implement it, the former is far from producing a stable democracy. Almost all elections in Bangladesh since the 1990s have been highly contentious. The governments they have produced are far from stable. The key prerequisite for this to occur, namely a constructive and responsible opposition, has tragically eluded Bangladesh since the then.

In fact, Bangladesh is besieged by waves of crime and violence. The Bureau of Human Rights in Bangladesh had reported that political turmoil claimed nearly 3,000 deaths in separate occurrences between 1996 and 2003. The statistics on violence get worse beyond that.34 The government of Khalida Zia admitted in 2005 that Islamist groups were largely responsible for much of this violence, which included indiscriminate bombings, and attacks on police and civilians. Her government cracked down hard on the extremists; hundreds were jailed and many executed, but that did not eliminate the sources of extremism. This was because the Jamaat-e-Islami and its sympathizers were aided and abated by Begum Zia’s party activists and local political leaders.35

In 2008, the AL and Sheikh Hasina returned to power with a thumping majority in a 70 percent voter turnout. Almost immediately she faced revolts and attempted coups, not to mention total noncooperation, from the opposition led by the BNP. Sheikh Hasina came under additional fire when she established an International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) to try the army personnel involved in Mujibur Rahman’s assassination in 1975. Twelve Islamic parties staged a thirty-hour, nationwide strike in early July 2011 to protest the legislation to make Bangladesh a secular state, although Islam was to retain its preeminence.36 In January 2012, the army announced that it had foiled an attempted coup by some of its officers. Charges and countercharges of large-scale corruption and bribery flew fast and furious between the BNP and the AL in the parliament and in the media.

Two interrelated developments between 2012 and 2015 threaten the future of democracy in Bangladesh: the paralyzing rivalry between the BNP and AL. The BNP and AL also harbor distinctly different visions for Bangladesh. The AL generally favors secularism, a welfare state and believes its interests lie in adopting a pro-India stance. The BNP wants Bangladesh to be an Islamic state; favors close ties to Islamic countries, particularly Pakistan; and prefers a market-oriented economy. But these policy differences pale before the personal nature of rivalry between its top leaders.

Rise of virulent and violent Islam poses the second threat to Bangladesh’s democracy. In the past decade, religious extremism has taken a violent turn with moral policing by self-appointed protectors of Islam, acid attacks on women, rioting, bombings, and rejection of the AL’s secular ideology.37 The Jamaat frequently works at tandem with the BNP, but it has seen its fortunes reverse because of arrests and trials carried out by the Hasina government for having committed war crimes and treasonous action in assassinating Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Additionally, the BNP and AL bitterly disagree over the provision of appointing caretaker government in-between elections. Sheikh Hasina argues that the parliamentary form of government makes this provision redundant; Begum Khalida argues that a caretaker government is necessary to ensure fair elections. Democracy in Bangladesh has become hostage to extra-constitutional politics of protests.
Pakistan

It is fair to argue that the partition of Pakistan and birth of Bangladesh was a consequence of military rule that has strangulated democracy in Pakistan. Unlike India, Pakistan inherited a meager civil administration and fewer economic resources in the 1947 partition. The Muslim League, which had led the fight for partition, lacked a popular base in the provinces that emerged as the nation-state of Pakistan.38 What is more, while the 1948 war over Kashmir made India a permanent enemy, Pakistan gained little in territory from this gamble. The fear of the larger and more powerful India, in fact, led to damaging consequences for its civil/military balance and democratic prospects. Obsession with external threat strengthened the military. Democratic prospects dimmed even more when Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan, died within a year of its emergence as a new nation. Democracy in Pakistan foundered therefore as the bureaucracy and military, the two unelected institutions, took control of politics. The Punjabis and Muhajirs (those who has migrated from India to Pakistan) dominated these institutions, while the civilian government that might have provided some representation to other nationalities of Pakistan – the Bengalis, Siddhis, and Baluchistan – never found purchase in the formation of governments during the early decades.39

Islam and ethnicity were the competing poles of identity in Pakistan. Ethnically diverse Pakistan required a constitutionally ordered mechanism for sharing power among its nationalities. Such a design would have weakened the pull of Islam as a basis for Pakistan’s identity. But prominence of the unelected elements in these early years crushed not only popular aspirations in Pakistan but also aggravated the tensions among its nationalities. As new states, both India and Pakistan had to struggle to unify their nations. This effort took Pakistan in the opposite direction from India. Military became the primary contender for power in Pakistan.

The story of Pakistan – from the late 1950s to the early 1970s – is one of repeated democratic failures. General Mohammad Ayub Khan, the commander-in-chief of Pakistan’s armed forces, took control of the country and declared martial law in 1958. This formal assumption of power by the military was simply an admission of what had been true since the death of Liaquat Ali Khan, Pakistan’s first prime minister in 1951. Ayub Khan aligned Pakistan with the US in the Cold War. That ushered in a symbiotic relationship between the Pakistan military and the US, which has had the most detrimental effect on Pakistan’s democratic aspirations. Ayub Khan introduced a party-less “basic democracy”, but when popular protests rose at the blatant usurpation of power and wealth by a handful of Pakistani families close to the military, Ayub Khan had to cede power to a civilian government.40 But in the years between 1965, when he lost power, and 1973, when the first popularly elected government was formed under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Pakistan seesawed between war, partition, and civil war. Political events had catapulted into public life two leaders who were to change Pakistan’s destiny: Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in East Pakistan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, a Western educated diplomat from a large landholding family in West Pakistan. Each led a popular revolt against the praetorian rule. Bhutto rode high on the economic discontent created by the concentration of wealth and income during the Ayub regime; Mujibur Rahman rode to power on the demand for political autonomy for the Bengali nationality in East Pakistan.

The Bhutto-led movement created the second opening to democracy in Pakistan, but the AL’s electoral victory and the subsequent civil war postponed the democratic moment. Between 1969 and 1973, Pakistan was again ruled by the military, although the latter stood discredited after the defeat in 1971. Military’s weakening following its defeat allowed Bhutto
Maya Chadda

... to press for a new constitution that would dedicate Pakistan to a parliamentary democracy. This first genuine experience with democracy lasted four years, but the military was actively seeking a return to power. In 1977, Zia Mohammad Ul Haq, the chief of army staff, seized power, arrested Bhutto, declared martial law, and established military rule in Pakistan.

The Zia years (1977–1988) transformed the state and nation of Pakistan. He banned political parties, censored the press, and declared himself and his administration beyond judicial review. He Islamized Pakistan by making the Koranic law and Muslim clergy pivotal in the public sphere. These ten years coincided with the onset of the second Cold War triggered by the December 1979 Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Zia promptly made Pakistan the conduit for US arms to Afghan mujahedeen fighting the Soviet troops. This new development had two unintended consequences: The US support against the Soviet occupation prolonged the military rule and gave Zia the time to entrench the military and Islam more deeply in Pakistan’s political life. The second consequence followed from the first. Under Zia, Pakistan witnessed the rise of extremist Islam. Over the years, extremism not only set back democratic aspirations, weakened the civilian governments when they were elected (1990–1999) but also threatened the existence of the state. Pakistan’s military and intelligence services coopted the jihadi groups to further their foreign and domestic agenda.

Zia’s unexpected death in a plane crash in 1988 created the third democratic opportunity for Pakistan. This third opening lasted for about ten years, during which five elected governments assumed power. Each was, however, dismissed by the military long before its tenure in office was completed. Each elected government – alternating between the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) led by Benazir Bhutto and the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) led by Nawaz Sharif was dismissed on charges of rampant corruption and incompetence. Whether this was an excuse or the genuine reason, Pakistan’s political parties could not evolve a democratic transfer of power under the sword of the armed forces. On its part, the military was able to winnow away aspiring leaders and break any unified front that challenged its political role and ambitions. In wrecking the political system by factional fights and personalized rivalries, Pakistan’s political parties resembled the patterns created by the parties in Bangladesh. The difference was the political heft of the armed forces. After 1990s, they appeared to have taken a decisive backseat in Bangladesh. Pakistan’s civilian governments attempted to expand their elbow room by repealing provisions that had granted the military legal immunity from prosecution, but these attempts almost immediately triggered summary dismissals.

In 1999, General Pervez Musharraf seized power and ended the decade-long experiment with weak civilian governments. The immediate trigger for the coup was the clash between India and Pakistan over the latter’s insertion of infiltrators in the Kargil region of Kashmir. These infiltrations violated the 1948 cease-fire line between India and Pakistan. When Prime Minister Sharif agreed to withdraw the infiltrators under US pressure, General Musharraf dismissed the Sharif government and seized control of the state. History seemed to repeat itself following the Al-Qaeda attack on the twin towers in New York in 2001. Arms and money poured into Pakistan in the wake of the attack. The US had again found Pakistan indispensable in the fight against its global enemy, this time the Islamic international led by Osama bin Laden. Military assistance strengthened Musharraf and emboldened him to intensify Zia’s ‘Jihadi strategy’ to weaken India.

As in earlier phases of martial law, popular clamor to restore democracy steadily gained ground throughout 2007 and 2008. The lawyer’s protest over suspension of Pakistan’s chief justice finally forced Musharraf to resign. The February 2008 elections brought the PPP and Asif Ali Zardari, Benazir’s widowed husband, to power. Benazir had been assassinated while campaigning for elections. In some ways, the 2009 parliamentary election was a turning point for Pakistan.
The state of democracy in South Asia

point in Pakistan's history. It produced the first democratic government that completed its
term in office and transferred power peacefully in 2013 to the PML led by Nawaz Sharif.

Pakistan's democracy, however, remains besieged on many fronts. The military
is a constant threat to weak civilian governments. The military refuses to give up
decision-making over relations with the US, India, and Afghanistan, key appointments
in defense and intelligence agencies and control of military budgets. The second threat is
from the proliferating Islamic terrorist groups that have become emboldened to attack the
military and seek to capture the Pakistani state. The number of Pakistani civilians killed
in the terrorist attacks and suicide bombings, not to mention the Shia-Sunni conflict, has
grown exponentially. The mayhem created by the Islamic extremists is so threatening
that Pakistan armed forces launched an attack on the Tribal areas in the North Frontier
Agency that have sheltered them. Elements in the armed forces and intelligence agencies,
however, continue to sympathize with the extremists. As Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's
government entered its second year, clashes between him and the Army Chief Ashraf
Pervez Kayani sharpened. The military opposes a conciliatory stance toward India and
India's presence in Afghanistan. The current civilian government knows that it must defer
to the military or risk a coup.

Sri Lanka

While military dominance had permitted Pakistan to be only a partial democracy, Sri Lanka
began as a fairly stable parliamentary democracy and remained so for fifteen years after
independence. Tensions began to surface between its majority Sinhala and minority Tamil
communities in the 1970s and culminated into a civil war that can be traced to the killing
of thirteen Sri Lankan soldiers in 1983 by the organization of Tamil militants that have
demanded a separate Tamil state. Sri Lanka moved from a parliamentary to a presidential
democracy in the 1980s. This did signal shift of power to the executive, but the change did
not derail the electoral commitment. Elections were held regularly, and people went to the
polls free of fear. The quality of democracy suffered hugely, however, as the war unleashed
terrorism, and counterviolence by the state. These years have left a deep sense of distrust and
animosity between Sri Lanka's majority Sinhala and minority Tamils. Not surprisingly, Sri
Lanka steadily succumbed to authoritarian compulsions and became increasingly indifferent
to human rights abuses by the state.

While the Sinhala and Tamils speak different languages and follow different culture and
religion, they have routinely intermarried and lived in harmony for long periods in history.
The rise of Sinhala exclusivism and hyper-nationalism, however, destroyed this harmony
and transformed Tamil demands for fair treatment and equal opportunities into a demand for
a separate Tamil state. Political outbidding over which party represents the true interests of
the Sinhala majority added fuel to the fire of ethnic conflict.

The Sinhala leaders argue that the British had favored the Tamils and hence given them
a head start in public life. In contrast, the Sinhala majority, they argue, remained propor-
tionally underrepresented in jobs and education. Elected governments in Sri Lanka have
therefore introduced legislations that have sought to advance the cause of the Sinhala at the
expense of the Tamils since the 1950s. Second, Sri Lanka was declared a unitary state at its
inception and has remained so for much of its postindependence history. As noted in the case
of Nepal, India, and Pakistan, unitary states are ill-suited to the task of national integration,
particularly when culture, language, and religion divide its people. Unitary Sri Lanka denied
the Tamil aspirations to self-rule and autonomy.
While numerous small parties contest elections, two national parties – the Sri Lanka Freedom party (SLFP) and the United National Party (UNP) – have dominated Sri Lankan politics. Each has sought to occupy the political center to capture the majority. The SLFP has generally a history of closer ties to Tamil leaders than the UNP. The latter is closely identified with the idea of establishing Sinhala dominance. The rise of hyper-nationalism within a unitary state structure has made doubly difficult for Sri Lanka to resolve the nationality question via the ballot box.

The ethnic conflict of the 1980s escalated into a civil war in the subsequent decades. Largely ceremonial in origin, the Sri Lankan army could not match the better-motivated and well-trained Tamil militants. Fighting spread from Jaffna in the north to the eastern provinces in the 1990s. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) boldly attacked army bases and state facilities, killed hundreds of civilians, engaged Sri Lankan forces in regular warfare, and murdered scores of Sri Lankan officials and leaders, including the Prime Minister Premadasa and even the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. The latter killing was in revenge for India’s role in supporting the Sri Lankan government’s effort to disarm the LTTE. Unable to complete its mission and ordered to leave the country, India withdrew its peacekeeping forces in 1990, although the war continued. It took another nine years before it ended. Vast quantities of weapons purchases and military expansion made the Sri Lankan armed forces a better match to the LTTE. The military decapitated the insurgency and killed its leader, V. Prabhakaran, in May 2009.

The thirty years of civil war had unleashed forces that threatened the liberties Sri Lankans had enjoyed in the first decade and a half of independence. Close to 100,000 people were killed in the civil war between 1983 and 2009. More than half of the dead were civilians. The human rights abuses had become pervasive, while the civil/military balance had tilted sharply in favor of a strong president and powerful military. Both these institutions had accumulated extraordinary powers. Censoring the press and media became common, as the imprisoning of citizens on a mere suspicion. These tactics were also employed routinely against the opposition and political dissent. The war for a separate Tamil Eelam had failed, but the canker of ethnic distrust had struck deep roots in Sri Lanka. What is more, Tamil grievances remain unresolved.

Against this grim history, defeat of Mahinda Rajapaksa and election of Sirisena in 2015 raised a ray of hope that perhaps Sri Lankans have turned away from the authoritarian path advocated by Rajapaksa. The latter favored greater ethnic and political accommodation, which if implemented could reinforce democracy in Sri Lanka.

Summary

In 1990, as the third wave of democracy swept the globe, every state in South Asia was either ruled by a popular mandate or was moving toward one. This included Pakistan and Bangladesh, where military had dominated political life. Since then, democracy has advanced in some states and retreated elsewhere in South Asia. But everywhere popular aspirations for democracy remain high. In Nepal, democratic beginnings failed to establish a stable central state; the battle between the king and the parliament did not resolve in a manner it had resolved in England two and a half centuries ago. While popular uprising (the Jan Andolan) ushered in a parliamentary government, it did not create the institutions necessary to sustain it. After a contentious debate spanning two Constituent Assemblies and a decade, Nepal has produced a constitutional draft, but its ethnic communities – the Madhesis and hills people – remain profoundly unhappy.
Although Bangladesh is arguably steps ahead of Nepal in establishing a democracy, it is unable to settle its political conflicts within the halls of parliament. Instead, these are fought out in the streets with mass strikes, demonstrations, and inter-party violence. Bangladesh does not face an acute problem of ethnic diversity but is besieged by the rise of violent organizations of Wahhabi extremist that seek the rule of the Sharia as the law of the land.

Extremist jihadi are even more active in Pakistan. In both Pakistan and Bangladesh, Islam’s role in the construction of national identity remains muddled. The problem is compounded by political sponsorship of such groups by ambitious leaders and political entrepreneurs who disguise their appetite for power behind the façade of religious correctness. The Maoists in Nepal have similarly sought to reshape the state. They too have committed large-scale violence in the name of the poor and downtrodden in Nepal. The thirty years of Tamil-Sinhala conflict destroyed Sri Lanka’s social fabric. While elections were regularly held, elected governments failed to produce a formula that would meet the Tamil aspirations. In fact, the cycle of violence seemed to take on a life of its own with little regard for the plight of the Tamil community. Exhaustion and defeat finally ended the war, but there is no guarantee that peace will prevail. Ethnic discontent can once again spark ethnic violence. Hailed as a successful democracy, even India is increasingly besieged by a growing distrust between its majority Hindu and minority Muslim and Christian communities. In the post-1990 years, parties championing the cause of ‘Hindu culture’ (as distinct from Muslim or Christian) have assumed the mantle of nationalism and won elections to form governments. Any attempt to realize their “one country, one nationality” vision is likely to destroy India’s unity and derail democracy.

Pakistan is not immune to the pressures of democracy as evident in the decade between 1990 and 2000 and again since 2008 to the present. But several surveys show considerable popular support for the military. This does not bode well for Pakistan’s democracy, which faces a difficult dilemma: Its military will not allow a civilian government to take full control, and its elected governments are not powerful enough to force the military back to the barracks. The Pakistani state must battle religious extremist to preserve its nation, but its security establishment, the intelligence agencies, and military support these same extremists. It is a state at war with itself.

The experience of democratization in South Asia shows that

1. Competitive party contest has increasingly become the avenue to power. Ironically, however, elections do not displace violence.
2. South Asia’s democratic experience does not tell us with any certainty whether a strong or its opposite, a weak state provides greater scope to democratization. The only example of a sustained democracy is India, which journeyed into independent nationhood with a strong and commanding central state, legitimized by a popular mandate. It pursued national integration based on accommodation of diverse ethnic nationalities. However, subsequent democratization occurred because power devolved away from the central state. This occurred following the demise of the single-party dominance of the INC and beginning of coalition governments in 1990s. Elsewhere in South Asia, a strong centralized state has prevented democracy. This is evident in Nepal under the monarchy (1950–2006), and Pakistan and Bangladesh under a series of military regimes.
3. To sustain democracy, South Asian states must be willing to and capable of meeting the aspirations of diverse ethnic, cultural, and regional communities. A single one-time accord is not sufficient; agreements need to be revised as social and economic circumstances change. Failure to do so is likely to pit the state against the nation or a part of its nation. This was the case
as the conflicts in Punjab, Kashmir, and Nagaland in India show; the thirty years of civil war in Sri Lanka demonstrates; disaffection and growing militancy among Madhesis and hill communities of Nepal indicate; and Bengali (1970) and Baloch insurgencies in Pakistan prove. Unmet ethnic aspirations turn into protest and eventually into an insurgency.

4 Electoral democracy has largely failed to guarantee rule of law, political accountability, honest government, or economic equity. These features require the creation of impartial institutions that can survive the changes in governments. Unfortunately, elections have become occasions for flagrant violation of law, corruption, irresponsible and unprincipled political deals, orchestrated violence, and unconstitutional use of state power to fix the outcome. All over South Asia, political parties and governments have coopted police and judiciary, armed forces, bureaucracy and civil service, and even educational and monitoring bodies that should have been left to function as independent agencies.

5 South Asia’s political parties fight to finish their opponents instead of fighting over policy and making constructive counterproposals as evident in the confrontational politics of the Bangladesh political parties. Although in India and Sri Lanka, political parties wait to take their turn in office, they have also succumbed to confrontational tactics when in the opposition. The result is a paralyzed parliament and state assemblies that become incapable of performing the function for which they were elected in the first place.

6 Although in India and Sri Lanka and recently in Bangladesh, the military is under civilian control, democracy in the latter two countries has had to contend with preponderant executive power. Pakistan is virtually a diarchy with a dominant military and a weak civilian government. Military is preponderant in Pakistan because of perceived external threats but also because of the contentious pulls of Pakistan’s segmented nationalities. These have demanded recognition of their distinctive identity. Authoritarian formations – monarchies and military dictatorships – are ill-suited to the task of negotiated inclusion. What is more, they have left behind a legacy of undemocratic practices, which have been readily adopted by current political actors. Emergence of top-heavy executives is the most obvious legacy of colonial rule, traditional monarchies, and military regimes.

7 The principle of public accountability is underdeveloped or absent in South Asia. This is largely because the watchdog agencies and institutions are weak or prevented from performing their stated function. The opposition frequently fails to perform the role it is meant to perform; parliaments do not act as arena for policy making; media and press have an urban bias and focus largely on the sensational at the expense of serious national issues; and last if not least, civil society – the lifeblood of a healthy democracy – lacks influence. These problems are compounded by poverty and illiteracy, low levels of education, and inattention to the vast masses of rural poor. Although each country is at a different level of economic and political development, all South Asian states display in some combination the characteristics described earlier.

South Asia’s democratic future

What then is the future of democracy in South Asia? Clearly, Nepal and Pakistan have to traverse a long distance before they can stabilize even a procedural democracy, one that provides a modicum of democratic rights. It will take even longer to establish the rule of law, impartial institutions, culture of accountability, and intra-party democracy. But, there are hopeful signs. Nepal has produced the most comprehensive and equitable constitution in South Asia. The public expectations are high, and all stakeholders are aware
The state of democracy in South Asia

of the dangers from insurgencies and absence of a coherent state. Electoral defeat of an authoritarian-minded Mahinda Rajapaksa raises the hope that Sri Lankans may want to put the civil war behind them and open a new chapter of democracy. The current government of Sirisena appears open to accommodation of Tamil sentiments. Success of democracy in Bangladesh has significance far beyond South Asia. It will prove that a predominantly Islamic nation can create and sustain a parliamentary democracy. But for that to happen, political parties in Bangladesh need to drop the confrontational tactics and stop using the Jamaat-e-Islami and similar radical groups as instrument against their opponents.

Similarly, India’s political parties must refrain from using religious appeal to expand their vote base or to undermine their opponents. Such shortsighted practices exacerbate ethnic prejudice, jeopardize national unity, and pit the nation against itself. What is more, Indian electorate show decided signs of voting for their pockets. Identity politics is less and less a determinant of who wins and who loses in Indian elections. This slow but definite move toward class politics amidst resurgence of BJP’s cultural politics is likely to shape India’s democracy. Its resilience has been amply demonstrated over the past seventy years during which it endured with one exception. The emergence of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) (loosely translated as common man’s party) and its widespread appeal is a case in point. The AAP does not draw on conventional identity politics of caste, religion, and region. The most recent state elections in the five states in India at once reaffirm popular faith in democracy but also the dangers of majoritarian rule that will threaten India’s secular, federal democracy. This is largely because the opposition parties stand hopelessly divided, while the victorious BJP is committed to the Hindu nationalist agenda.

Democracy is not a new idea in South Asia as the progressively growing number of parties and electoral contests indicate. But it still presents a mixed picture. Modernization, rapid urbanization, the spread of education and media, and growing participation in national life have unleashed a powerful desire for democratic rule. Wherever a democracy has survived, as in India and Sri Lanka, the public has increasingly pushed for expanding individual and collective rights, economic equity, and honest and efficient government. Spread of cell phone and Internet and social media has, in fact, created a virtual public square in which South Asians express their doubts and criticize their governments. Political leaders are now increasingly under public scrutiny, and the press and media regularly subject politicians to scrutiny for criminal and illegal activities, taking bribes and even uncivil behavior. The growing awareness of political rights under a democratic dispensation is the most hopeful development in South Asia.

Notes

1 For some of the best accounts of these early years of India’s state formation, see Krishan Bhatia, pp. 66–125.
4 D. R. SarDesai, p. 318, argues that had Nehru chosen, he could have been a dictator. His popularity gave him that option. In fact, Nehru feared that he could easily slip into dictatorship out of sheer frustration and impatience to transform India. But he remained conscientiously a democrat and a Fabian socialist.
5 In this chapter, I have used the Congress party as a short nomenclature to refer to the Congress party of India, which went through several metamorphoses and even split twice to produce two instead of one unified Indian National Congress. Here, the reference is always to the Congress party that formed a government.
6 Louise Tillin, p. 34.
Maya Chadda

7 Uma Kapila, pp. 32–44.
8 Selig Harrison, India: The Most Dangerous Decades, reissued in 2015.
9 See Rajni Kothari, pp. 100–152.
10 Kothari, op. cit., p. 175.
11 For Indira Gandhi’s policies, see Stuart Corbridge and John Harriss, pp. 67–93.
12 Maya Chadda, pp. 77–102.
13 Ibid., pp. 175–200.
14 Ibid., pp. 123–145.
15 For Sri Lankan Tamil insurgency and India’s role, particularly Rajiv Gandhi’s policies toward the ethnic crisis, see Maya Chadda, Ethnicity, Security and Separatism, pp. 145–175.
16 For a detailed account of this entire decade and a half, see Maya Chadda, pp. 61–99.
20 Sushila Tyagi, p. 108.
21 Maya Chadda, Building Democracy in South Asia: India, Nepal and Pakistan, p. 54.
22 Ibid., p. 56.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., p. 113; Lok Raj Baral, p. 22.
26 This section is largely based on Yogendra Malik et al., pp. 394–399.
31 Calf Dowlah, op. cit., p. 172.
33 Gholam Hossain, p. 198.
35 For the rise of extremist Islam and complicity of political parties, see Ali Riaz, “Politics of Vengeance and Erosion of Democracy,” p. 110.
37 Ali Riaz and C. Christine Fair (eds.), Political Islam and Governance in Bangladesh.
38 Yasmin Khan, The Great Partition. p. 43.
42 For this entire decade of quasi-democracy, see Maya Chadda, Building Democracy in South Asia, pp. 71–86. Also see Yogendra Malik et al., op. cit., pp. 216–221.
The state of democracy in South Asia

44 For postindependence politics in early years, see R. W. Kearney, The Politics of Ceylon.
47 N. Manoharan and Priyama Chakravarty, pp. 253–266.

References
Maya Chadda


