

State of Democracy in South Asia: India

SDSA Team

Editor: Sethi, H.

Principal investigators: Peter R. de Souza, Subas Palsbikar, Yogendra Yadav

Country Coordinator: Sanjay Kumar

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After 60 years of independent rule, and despite having one of the best democratic records of the region and the world, India has also contended with the problems of diversity, poverty and human rights. The State of Democracy in South Asia points out the major strengths and weaknesses of Indian democracy.

Key Recommendations:

- Measures must be taken to safeguard the primacy of democratic government over experts or international institutions.
- Measures to reduce the scale of competition and decentralize politics are required: such as the creation of smaller states in the Indian Union, increasing the financial powers of the states and territories and improving the finances and powers of the *Panchayati Raj* and *Nagar Palika* bodies.
- There is a need to improve access to resources in politics.
- Democratization needs to be strengthened by implementing freedom of information legislation, the autonomy of public broadcasting, democratization of media ownership and public accountability of media practices.

Key Findings

Aspiration for democracy

India does not fit the trend of global democratic triumph; democracy has neither been fully consolidated, nor have the economic conditions that are expected to give solid foundations to democracy being achieved. Nevertheless, democracy has widespread support: 92% of the citizens of India consider that democracy is suitable for their country. The data also indicates that India, along with Sri Lanka, show the strongest levels of support for democracy in South Asia. However, there is a favourable view of strong personal leadership and rule by experts.

Meanings of Democracy

The study found that there is no single South Asian meaning of democracy. Each country, region and group shares a different conception of what democracy means, determined by their own culture, their colonial and/or national histories and present day politics. The survey also indicates that only

46% of the respondents in India are able to offer some meaning of their own for the word “democracy”. The assessment team considers that this is due to socio-economic factors and the individual levels of social articulation, and is directly related to the degree of formal education and media exposure. Gender (in)equality reinforces such tendencies.

From Promise to Design

In India, the constitution includes special provisions to protect and safeguard religious minorities and ensures civilian control of the armed forces. However, enforcement is not at all secured; “emergency” provisions based on the ideas of order and consolidation of the state apparatus impairs the enforcement of rights. In addition, despite its federal system, centralization has been the main tendency in India. The national legislature in India enjoys wide powers, and provincial autonomy is one of the most persistent demands. These demands have been met with regionalization policies such as a uniform rural government system, *Panchayati Raj* and an urban government system.

Institutions and People

More people tend to have confidence in institutions than those who distrust them. In general, however, non-elected institutions that do not seek renewed mandates seem to be trusted more. In this sense, the armed forces enjoy very high levels of trust in India; almost 90% of the surveyed population expressed that they trusted the army while almost 60% articulated that they trust the civil service. The lower number for the latter is attributed to its more frequent interaction with the population. The researchers consider that one of the main reasons for the low levels of trust in parties and parliaments could be that they are not representative.

Dealing with Diversity

While different religious communities and faiths have lived together for a long time in the region, South Asia also has a history of contest and conflict for political power between these communities. Despite India being a country with low levels of majoritarianism that emphasizes ‘unity in diversity’, built-up pressure between these communities has been handled in a framework of non-negotiable supremacy of the nation-state and the country has experienced both regional and ethnic tensions. However, when it comes to successful democratic accommodation of minority needs and demands, India comes out as a champion in this respect thanks to linguistic policies, constitutional provisions and affirmative action policies for castes, tribes and other socially and educationally backward classes.

Party Political Competition

Political parties are the principal force around which public debate is organized. Parties initially took shape as movements and vehicles for mass mobilization, articulating democratic aspirations of the people and shaping nationalist consciousness. Afterwards, ethnic and regional pulls have resulted in the formation of new parties. The trend, however, is that criminality and corruption amongst party leaders are becoming more common and parties are becoming more identified with a single personality and are unable to develop internal mechanisms for leadership renewal and the renewal of senior office holders. Parties as autocratic and centralized organizations or powerful political dynasties are able to develop both at the national and regional levels.

Beyond Parties and Elections

The anti-colonial struggles during the early 20th century drew groups and individuals towards political parties, crystallising participation and mobilization this way from then onwards. In India, only 11% of the respondents report being members of a trade union, 15% has participated in protests, demonstrations and related activities, and only 6% of the respondents declare participating in other non-party and non-political forums. The researchers also found that party and non-party organizations actually overlap, for example, nearly 75% of trade union activists in India identify themselves with a political party. In addition, India has on several occasions experienced armed insurgency; an extreme manifestation of popular mobilization that reflects the dead-end of democratic politics.

Freedom from Fear

In India, 6% of respondents say that they, their family members or acquaintances faced physical assault during the last year. The relative sense of security was also gauged in the survey by asking how secure people felt in comparison to previous years. The image remains positive in general, and 37% of South Asia's population feels more secure than in the past, and 25% feels less secure. This trend is followed by India, with 45% of the population feeling more secure. In general, minority groups assign more relevance to communal violence, while people from specific regions are more concerned about issues of war and terrorism: as is the case in the Hindi heartlands in India

Freedom from Want

In general in the region, the proportion of people who thought their income did not cover their needs was higher than the official figure of people living below the line of poverty. In India, 63% of the population considers that their income does not meet their needs. Further, for the last couple of decades, the states of the region have moved away from state-led development strategies, embracing economic reforms and liberalization, privatisation and globalization. However, these reforms were not preceded by democratic debates and consensus building: and 50% of the population in the region rejects both privatisation and down-sizing of the government. Privatisation is most opposed in India and Sri Lanka.

Political Outcomes

There exists a widespread acceptance of democratic procedures in the region, making democracy the only legitimate game that everyone aspires to. One of the most significant transformations related to achieving a culture of democracy has to do with people moving away from being subjects to becoming citizens. One such aspect is that the right to vote is not only taken seriously, but also the effectiveness of the vote itself. The survey shows that 67% of Indians consider that their vote makes a difference, and the record of satisfaction with democracy is stronger in India and Bangladesh than in the rest of the region, even though the former is more critical of its performance, particularly regarding the lack of material amenities.

Why perform an assessment?

This executive summary is the result of a major assessment project launched by Lokniti-Programme for Comparative Democracy, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi, International IDEA and the Department of sociology of Oxford University in five South Asian countries: Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. All these countries have experienced profound transformations during the last 50 years, and none complies with conventional, Western notions of democracy. In this sense, a major goal of the assessment was to understand not only what democracy has done to South Asia, but also what South Asia has done to democracy.

Assessment Approach

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

This executive summary was prepared by International IDEA. Views expressed in this summary do not necessarily represent the views of International IDEA, its Board or its Council of Member States, or the local State of Democracy assessment team.