SoD Summary

State of Democracy in South Asia: Nepal

Despite a widespread feeling that the achievements of the 1990 People's Movement were lost, the popular struggle against monarchy and in favour of a republic is still on track. The State of Democracy in South Asia Project points to the crucial role of the people if democracy is to be realized in Nepal.

Key Recommendations:

- Reforms must be aimed at inclusion in the electoral system and proportional representation is therefore better suited to ensure fair representation.
- Federal arrangements, ethno-regional divisions, or autonomous regions would be most suitable to improve power distribution.
- The composition of the Constituent Assembly is crucial in determining the future of Nepali democracy.

The Assessment

Aspiration for Democracy

South Asia does not totally fit the trend of global democratic triumph: democracy has neither been fully consolidated, nor the previous economic conditions that are expected to give solid foundations to democracy have been achieved. Nevertheless, democracy has widespread support: 88% of the citizens surveyed from the five South Asian countries consider that democracy is suitable for them. This rate is lower in Nepal and Pakistan.

The survey revealed that religion was a major factor: 40% of the surveyed population in South Asia agreed that religious leaders, rather than politicians, should be empowered to make decisions. This trend is stronger in Bangladesh and Pakistan. Yet, this preference does cut across religious lines, and differs from country to country: thus, while Muslims in Pakistan are the least supportive, Muslims in Sri Lanka are most supportive of democracy, and Hindus in Nepal, India and Pakistan show stark differences in their levels of support for democracy too.

On a regional level, 26% of the respondents were defined as "strong democrats", and 22% as "non-democrats". Nevertheless, the sum of "strong" and "weak" democrats in the five countries outnumbers "non-democrats". Nepal and Pakistan have the highest levels of non-democrats, 24% and 41% respectively, although this proportion is equalled by a strong population of pro-democrats in Nepal, where 76% of the surveyed population were defined as "strong" or "weak" democrats.

The assessment shows that support for democracy varies across social groups: elites show stronger support for democracy than the masses; higher income respondents support democracy more than lower income respondents; men, particularly in Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan, support democracy more than women; and urban dwellers – especially in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, but not in India or Nepal – show stronger levels of support for democracy than rural dwellers.

The combination of formal education, media exposure and informal political education accounts for much of the difference in support for democracy in the South Asian region.

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 and idea of what democracy means, determined by their own culture, their colonial and/or national histories, and present-day politics. On the other hand, the region has also imprinted its own understandings on the notion of democracy. Thus, instead of the Western notion that puts a premium on popular control over rulers, equal rights and liberties for citizens, the rule of law and protection against tyranny; democracy in South Asia is associated principally with the ideas of people's rule, political freedom, equality of outcomes and community rights.

The survey indicates that a positive notion of freedom, which extends to freedom from want and need, is recognized by the majority of the respondents as a crucial attribute. That explains why the capacity to provide for basic necessities appears to be the most essential attribute of democracy according to 39% of the respondents, followed by the existence of equal rights, preferred by 37% of the surveyed population. This tendency is even more accentuated in Nepal, were 51% of the population surveyed stressed the importance of basic necessities as an essential attribute of democracy, followed by 31% who favoured equal rights.

The language of rights in popular discourse has shifted from the individual level to that of the community. The assessment team considers that the introduction of modern politics provided incentives for the creation of some of these communities. This provides an opportunity for struggle by marginal social groups while creating space for majoritarian interpretations of democracy: almost 66% of the surveyed population agrees that the will of the majority community should prevail in a democracy. However, majoritarianism is still not the dominant trend in the region and in Nepal it is virtually non-existent.

Democracy as a form of government appears to occupy a secondary meaning in popular imagination. Here, the idea of popular control of government takes precedence over other institutional mechanisms, even over the notion of rule of law.

Although South Asians understand the term democracy and attribute the above characteristics to it, the survey indicates that a little less than half of the respondents 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. Both the South Asian average and the Nepali proportion of respondents who can relate to democracy and express what it means is 47%.

From Promise to Design

Constitutional arrangements in South Asia do not translate completely the radical promises of democracy into its institutions. These constitutions did not fully break with their pre-democratic pasts for several reasons:
- Colonial and modern institutions were used in India to cope with power of traditional social norms and structures that threatened to block the expansion of democracy.
- In Nepal, colonial and monarchical arrangements were used as effective instruments of regulation to preserve the new state.
- Finally, colonial and monarchical institutions were seen by the elites to assure a counter-balance to the masses.

In general, South Asian constitutions provide a wide range of civil and political rights, and deploy several institutions to safeguard the rights of underprivileged and minority groups. At the time of preparing this report, the constitution of Nepal was still to be drafted, but the constitutions of the other South Asian countries all include special provisions to protect and safeguard religious minorities.

In spite of the above-mentioned provisions, enforcement is not at all secured. "Emergency" provisions, legal clauses allowing governments to suspend civil and political rights and the marginalization of political oppositions, all based on the ideas of order and consolidation of the state apparatus, impair the enforcement of rights. Provisions allowing state religions – Islam in Pakistan and Bangladesh, Buddhism in Sri Lanka, and (until recently) Hinduism in Nepal – run counter to those norms forbidding discrimination on the basis of faith.

The impact of British parliamentary traditions in the region is very strong, and inspired constitutional design: interdependent but autonomous legislatures and executives, independent judiciary and civilian supremacy. However, following a global trend, executive organs in the region have taken over important law and policy-making functions previously held by legislatures. The judiciary, particularly the higher courts, has also taken over certain functions that do not meet Western standards, such as the political function of making or breaking a government by deliberating on the legality of dissolving elected assemblies or the dismissal of elected governments

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at the federal or provincial levels. Nevertheless, the executive exerts pressure on the judiciary through making appointments, transfers, promotions, retirement or, in the cases of Sri Lanka and Pakistan, the extension of the tenure of judges. Civilian control of the armed forces is established by the respective constitutions of each country. Nevertheless, in Nepal, the armed forces have often sided with the monarchy.

As for electoral systems, the first-past-the-post system (FPTP) is the most common in the region. Proportional representation (PR) has also been adopted on a limited scale in Nepal, India, and Pakistan while Sri Lanka adopted it more extensively since 1978. However, the expected effects over the party system have not quite happened: while the FPTP design has produced multi-party competition in India, the introduction of PR in Sri Lanka has not been able to change the bipolar competition developed with the previous FPTP system.

Mechanisms of public and administrative accountability remain weak or virtually non-existent in South Asia. Together with the lack of watchdog organizations, *ombudsman* offices and other corrective mechanisms, instances of graft and corruption involving even senior political officers have become common. Corruption also reaches both the judiciary and the military.

Nepal is a particular example of constitutional deviation in the region, where the King gradually assumed executive powers from 2002 onwards. In 2005, the King assumed all powers by dismissing the government, suspending the political process and the observance of human rights. In May 2006, a mass mobilization for the restoration of democracy pressured the King to yield, and the Parliament was then reinstated and a constituent assembly formed.

Finally, in 2006, the press in Nepal was considered "not free".

Institutions and People

South Asians appear to trust their democratic institutions much like the rest of the world. In all five countries, more people tend to have confidence in institutions than those who distrust them. In Nepal, it is more about investing hope in political institutions, which is assumed to be related to a longer tradition of struggle for democracy.

In general, non-elected institutions that do not seek renewed mandates seem to be trusted more. In this sense, the armed forces in the region enjoy very high levels of trust; the same is found - Pakistan being the exception - with the courts and Electoral Commissions. These levels of trust do not apply, however, to the police or the civil service: those institutions that have stronger interface with the public seem to score lower than those which are more distant. Interestingly, the most visible institutions - the Parliament, political parties, police and civil service- score lower levels of trust. In the case of Nepal, confidence levels in the police and the civil service are higher with over 60% of respondents declaring trust in these institutions, while the Parliament and the political parties are the least trusted institutions, averaging 55%.

Levels of trust seem to depend more on locality, education and media exposure, and less on gender: urbanites, graduates and people with higher levels of media exposure show less trust towards institutions than rural dwellers, non-literate and people with no exposure to media. On the other hand, the assessment shows that trust in institutions is less dependent on cultural traits of the population, and more on political experience and social position.

According to the researchers, one of the main reasons for the low levels of trust in parties and parliaments seems to be that they are not representative: besides appearing as elite-captured institutions, there appears to be a lack of representation of all sectors in society. However, in Nepal, 5% of party candidates and 20% of the seats in Village Development Councils have been reserved for women.

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 conflicts for political power between these communities. These identities and differences became more assertive as a consequence of colonial policies. These tensions have been built into the nature of nationalism in the region.

On the other hand the accommodation of different national projects has been part of the democratic effort. However, state building has led to the suppression of cultural differences. Institutional designs throughout the region reflect this by dealing with issues of diversity through strategies which include the non-recognition of diversity, de-legitimization, assimilation, accommodation, and the redefinition of the nature of diversity itself.

The specific mix of politics and institutions has resulted in two contradictory tendencies: on the one hand, the region appears to be gradually moving towards accepting minimum thresholds of legitimate diversity in the public realm; on the other, popular response to assertions of minority identities seems to lead towards majoritarian behaviour.

National pride is pervasive: 98% of the region's population is proud of its nationality. The feeling is

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more intense in Pakistan. At the same time, the sense of pride in regional or ethnic identity is very strong as well, particularly in Pakistan. Moreover, both forms of identification are similar in quantitative terms. The function of the market and the different shares in the benefits of development compound ethnic and regional differences, while issues of language, autonomy and revenue sharing are matters of intense contest and struggle. All this gives room for political negotiations to reshape states.

In India and Pakistan, where federal arrangements were adopted, tensions and struggles are still visible. These tensions also trouble Nepal and Sri Lanka, where unitary states were established. However, there is an increasing acceptance of federal norms and the development of innovative mechanisms for settling the contested claims between national and the regional units.

The challenges posed by social diversity and the overlapping of spatial and social diversities -religion, sect, ethnicity, language and caste- are more complex. The definition itself of "majority" and "minority" is complicated as their boundaries are fuzzy: the languages of majorities and minorities have not become common; communities are not cohesive and homogeneous entities; and there are no fixed majorities or minorities, as the self-recognition as a member of the majority or minority depends upon regional or political contexts.

However, of all the countries surveyed, Nepal demonstrated the highest level of respondents, 60% who were not familiar with the distinction of 'minority' and 'majority', and majoritarianism is virtually non-existent in the country. This might be ascribed to the Nepali policy of 'one nation, one

dress, one language', which has led to that the elite upper casts from the Hills have completely dominated public life, resulting in severe estrangement and invisibilisation of minority groups such as the Madhesi. Nevertheless, there is a growing recognition of regional distinctions and this is in part due to the country's process of restoring multiparty democracy, which has forced it to recognize the existence of ethnic and religious minorities.

There was a significant mismatch between the official status of the religion of the respondents and their self-recognition as majority or minority:
- Two out of five respondents understood the language of minority/majority and identified themselves in line with the majority/minority status of their religion.
- 29% of the respondents of majority communities in Nepal recognize themselves as a minority, while this proportion reaches 16% of the majority Muslim community in Pakistan and Bangladesh.
- Conversely, 30% of the respondents from minority religions in Nepal saw themselves belonging to the majority.

The researchers consider the issue of religious minority rights to pose the biggest challenge to South Asian states. Four out of five states prioritize a particular religion -Hinduism in Nepal, Islam in Pakistan and Bangladesh, Buddhism in Sri Lanka- despite formal commitments to fair treatment of all religious communities. This duality provides a source of confusion in policy responses.

State responses to issues of social diversity, particularly regarding religious minorities, revolve around three models. The first involves successful democratic accommodation of minority needs and demands, of which India appears as its champion. Nepal, after the struggle for restoration of multi-party democracy, has also been forced to recognize the existence of ethnic minorities, rethink its tactics as a Hindu state and grant new rights to religious minorities.

A second model is that of non-accommodation or suppression of minority claims based on arguments of "order", "national interest", "unity" and "majority will". In general, these tactics have led to situations of separation and civil war, as happened with the non-recognition of the Madhesi community in Nepal.

The third, and dominant model, is that of majoritarianism. This response appears to be linked to the support for democracy, understood as the legitimate rule of the majority over minorities, and to the nature of nationalism in the region, built on anti-colonial struggles and the politicization of communities. According to the survey, this means that:
- Although there is little opposition to equal treatment of majorities and minorities, there is scant support for special protective measures for minorities.
- About 25% of the population agree that minorities should adopt the ways of the majority community.
- Respect for minority concerns and rights are more pronounced in Bangladesh and India, while the proportion of majoritarians in Sri Lanka and Pakistan exceed those who take a pro-diversity position.
- Support for majoritarian or pro-diversity positions depends more on the national context than on religion: thus, if in Pakistan Muslims tend to be majoritarian, Muslims in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India tend to be strongly pro-diversity.

Party Political Competition

Political parties in South Asia are the principal force around which public debate is organized, structuring political alternatives, formulating policies and translating them into an intelligible set of choices. The large space occupied by political parties can be explained precisely through one of the major critiques posed to them: the lack of institutionalization, solid ideology and policy agenda

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allows political parties in the region to organise resistance and lead struggles.

Parties initially took shape as movements and vehicles for mass mobilization, articulating democratic aspirations of the people and shaping nationalist consciousness: the Nepali Congress Party, the Congress Party in India, the Ceylon Workers Congress in Sri Lanka, the Muslim League in Pakistan, and the Awami League in Bangladesh, all functioned both as movements and political parties.

After independence, all of them assumed central roles in designing and managing institutions of representation and governance. Thus, political parties in the region have to deal with roles that are performed by other democratic institutions elsewhere. Moreover, ethnic, class, linguistic and religious divisions and extreme disparities between individuals and groups compound this situation. Political parties end up reflecting all of these issues and acquire coalition characteristics. Finally, the history of each country influences the nature of political parties.

Party political competition in South Asia has been very unstable over the last few decades and party systems have undergone major changes. Although major political parties and labels have survived, the structure of competition has changed dramatically:

- Some founding parties met with their demise, creating political vacuums into which new parties can enter. This is the case of the Muslim League in Pakistan, which effectively destroyed itself soon after independence.
- Splits in major parties have allowed the development of new political actors. The Pakistan Muslim League and the Pakistan People's Party have seen many divisions. In Bangladesh, the Jatiya party has split three times in a decade. Both the Nepali Congress and the RPP have

- separated several times. For decades, the opposition in India came from several splits within the Congress Party. Most of these were caused by leadership clashes.
- Regime-fostered parties, forged by non-democratic regimes which survived in the arena of political competition include the Pakistan Muslim League formed by Ayub Khan, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party formed by Zia-ur Rahman, and the Jatiya Party set up by General Ershad.
- Ethnic and regional pulls have often resulted in the formation of new parties. The Nepal Sadbhavna Party seeks to represent the cause of the Madhesi population while the Janmukti parties articulate the indigenous peoples of Nepal. The inability of the two major parties to win the confidence of the Tamil population in Sri Lanka, led to the emergence of a parallel party system in the Tamil speaking areas. India has witnessed the rise of many caste- or regional-based parties like the BSP (Dalits), TDP (Andhra Pradesh), the AGP (Ahomiya minority in Assam) or parties with national nomenclature based in one state (Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh, AIADMK in Tamil Nadu).

Political party fragmentation has led to a multiplication of parties contesting elections and attaining representation in national assemblies, despite the first-past-the-post electoral systems operating throughout most of the region. To control this situation, each country has established high entry barriers to electoral representation, which act as a deterrent for new and small political formations: however, the number of political parties has not diminished. In Nepal, despite the 40 parties that participated in the last election, the effective number of parties has remained around four since democratic elections were held in 1991. This situation is expected to change with the intensification of politics after the restoration of Parliament and the entry of the Maoists into the democratic arena.

Larger numbers of political parties seem to draw citizens closer to political activity. According to the assessment surveys, 16% of the population reported taking part in political party activities, surpassing levels of participation in sport clubs (15%), cultural organizations (13%), trade unions and NGOs (11% each), and second only to those held by religious organizations (33%). Moreover, the levels of identification with any political party are relatively high: 43% of the region's population identify themselves with a political party. However, only 29% of the Nepali respondents identify with a political party.

The demise of one-party dominance has led to coalition politics and the need for support from smaller parties. Moreover, all political parties in the region face two challenges dealing with spatial and social diversities. First, diversity and public expectations in each country result in competitive politics sharpening differences and running against unified notions of common citizenry. Second, weak party organizations reduce abilities to aggregate concerns, leading to parties becoming narrow-interest organizations.

South Asia appears to have entered a phase of political ethnicization, where each party claims sectional support but needs to build coalitions in order to effectively achieve representation. Although polarising the system, this tendency has also led to increased identification with political parties and improved mechanisms for reconciling competing claims of different social constituencies.

Despite this, dissatisfaction with political parties, both as vehicles for representation and agencies for governance, has increased in most countries. However, there is a tendency towards that longstanding democracies experience higher distrust in political parties. In Nepal, the trust in political parties sharply increased between 2004 and 2006, going from 40% to 64% of the surveyed population expressing trust in political parties. This despite the fact that the general trend in the region is that criminality and corruption amongst party leaders has become more common, parties are becoming more identified with a single personality and are unable to develop internal

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mechanisms for leadership renewal and the renewal of senior office holders, leadership renewal and increased participation in decision making processes. Parties that become autocratic and centralized organizations or powerful political dynasties are able to develop both at the national and regional levels. This is something that has also been seen in Nepal, where the leading political party, the Nepali Congress, has traditionally been dominated by the Koirala family.

Nevertheless, political parties contribute to the expansion of participation in South Asia. Elections show a fair turnout, with large numbers of poor, under-privileged and marginalized people participating. Almost 90% of the survey respondents in the region have voted at least once. However, women are marginalized from all forms of political action, and participate at half the rate of their fellow male citizens.

Beyond Parties and Elections

Traditionally, South Asian societies have had a very rich life of associations. However, the anti-colonial and anti-monarchical struggles during the early 20th century drew groups and individuals towards political parties, crystallising participation and mobilization this way from then onwards. However, dissatisfaction and alienation produced by different experiences of democratic politics and state policy led to seeking alternative and parallel forms and strategies to gain a voice in the system, enhance participation in decision-making and re-orient state policy to accommodate new concerns.

Participation in voluntary activism is relatively widespread. However, the survey shows that it is easier for elites to afford and participate in voluntary organizations. Higher levels of media exposure

are related to higher levels of voluntary activism.

The assessment shows that the proportion of reported membership in trade unions is far lower than what could be expected. At the regional level, 11% of the respondents report being members of a trade union, while in Nepal it is less at 9%.

Trade union membership is less extensive amongst poorer workers. This limited engagement may be caused in part because unions find it easier to work with the organized sector of workforce, in spite of the fact that more than 90% of the workforce in the region is unorganized: farming and allied activities, services and trade. This labour structure results in the loosening of labour regulations.

Compared to the levels of trade union participation, the levels are doubled when it comes to participation in protests, demonstrations and related activities. In general, 19% of the respondents indicated they have participated in protests, struggles or movements. This proportion reaches 15% in Nepal.

A substantial number of people participate in other non-party and non-political forums, ranging from religious and cultural organizations to NGOs. The latter have become very important in the region, as in Nepal, where 9% of the respondents report participating through them. In the case of Nepal and Bangladesh, the increased participation in NGOs can be explained by the difficulties experienced in establishing government mechanisms for development and service provision, accompanied by a liberal availability of donor finance.

Women's organizations are strong in Nepal with 27% of the surveyed women participating in them. The researchers found that party and non-party organizations actually overlap. The relationship between protest activity and party identification is strong: 66% of the Nepalese active in protest activity identify themselves with a political party. Large numbers of protesters also identify themselves as campaigners, as 66% of the respondents in Nepal indicated.

Besides liberation and democratic social movements, popular movements based on religious issues also seem to be gaining strength throughout the region. According to the surveys, 33% of the population in South Asia participates in a religious movement, a proportion slightly higher in Nepal (36%).

It has to be noted that, despite the proven potential to mobilize large numbers of people and alter the fragile relationship between religion and secular politics (for instance, the Majils, Jammat-e-Islami or the Tabligh in Pakistan and Bangladesh; the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal in India; the Buddhist clergy and organizations in Sri Lanka), the directly confessional parties have rarely managed to secure a popular mandate. However, these religious movements, rather than deepening democracy, have significantly contributed to the majoritarian tendencies in the region.

Armed insurgency is an extreme manifestation of popular mobilization and has been experienced by all countries in South Asia. Whether as expressions of nationalism, struggles for autonomous realization of cultural identity, or as a challenge to the discriminatory and exclusionary process of growth and development, insurgency reflects the dead-end of democratic politics - the inability of states and regimes to accommodate urges of disaffected peoples.

In general, there is popular support for armed insurgency: in Nepal, 40% of the population has great trust in the Maoists; while in India, almost 40% of those surveyed feel that Maoist demands are genuine. However, significant majorities disapprove of the methods. Thus, peaceful and negotiated solutions are preferred: this is the case of Sri Lanka, where all ethnic and religious groups, including the Sinhala, favour negotiations over a military solution to end the conflict.

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There is a strong ongoing debate on the efficacy of the voluntary sector and its contribution to the enlargement and deepening of democracy. Despite the articulation of new issues not foreseen by political parties and state agencies, critics remain sceptical about the nature of claims, the non-representative, unaccountable and undemocratic nature of many organizations, their links with donor agencies and their capacity to disrupt national agendas and policies.

Freedom from Fear

The assessment team approached the question of human security by tilting away from expert-based perceptions and traditional strategic views of security towards a commonsense view of the people.

The survey indicates that there is a high level of experience of physical insecurity. In this sense, 9% of respondents in the region say that they, their family members or acquaintances faced physical assault in the last year. This proportion is slightly lower in Nepal, with 8%.

However, these experiences of insecurity do not translate into perceptions of insecurity: only 6% of the population across the region feels unsafe, while more than 70% feel safe in their own dwellings. This perception of safety is the strongest in India and Sri Lanka, and lowest in Nepal. The feeling of insecurity in Nepal is related to a lack of trust in the national government and the police force before the King assumed executive powers in early 2005.

The relative sense of security was also gauged in the survey asking how secure people felt in comparison to previous years. The impression given was generally positive:37% of South Asia's

population feels more secure than in the past, and 25% feels less secure. Nepal, on the other hand, had a majority of people feeling less secure than in previous years: 53% of the respondents versus 12% who felt safer than before.

Women are seen, both by men and women, as less secure. One out of six respondents considers that it is unsafe for women to go out after sunset: this rate is three times higher than the general level of insecurity in South Asia. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, more men than women consider it unsafe for women, while the opposite happens in Nepal, India and Sri Lanka. In Nepal, Bangladesh and India, men were equally divided over women's safety at work, while in Pakistan the proportion of men that considers it unsafe is double that of men who consider it safe for women at the workplace. More women in Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan thought it was unsafe, while in Sri Lanka the number of women who thought it was safe at work outnumbered those who thought it was unsafe.

The feeling of insecurity is higher among minorities in Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. However, minority status is compounded by other factors: objective material conditions, social tensions and levels of tolerance of diversity, official state policies towards minorities and marginal groups, and the levels of identity-based mobilization amongst the majorities.

According to the researchers, people's common views run counter to expert knowledge on security. The survey shows that the sources of insecurity are, in order of relevance, theft, assault, kidnap, riots, militancy, terrorism, war and armed force action. However, minority groups assign more relevance to the community violence, while people from specific regions are more concerned about issues of war and terrorism. This is the case in the central Tarai in Nepal, the Sylhet region in Bangladesh, the northern areas of Sri Lanka and the Hindi heartlands in India.

Media exposure plays a significant role in the increased concerns with war and terrorism. Political discourse and domestic politics also affect popular concerns on security. For example, the post 9/11 discourse in Pakistan influenced popular imagination and led to global terrorism and war becoming the second and third most important concerns, respectively. In India, militant and insurgent activities have become the third source of insecurity after constant public debates.

The armed and security forces in the region, although engaged in anti-insurgency activities crucial for the continuity of national states, are also a source of concern, as charges of excessive violence and violations of human rights, non-responsive and undemocratic behaviour are often publicized. In this sense, the surveys indicate that popular experience and interaction with the armed forces, although frequently helpful according to 46% of the population that had contact with these agencies, has also been one of harassment or assault for 17% of the region. This proportion is worse regarding interaction with the police: while 39% of the population who interacted with police forces considered them to be helpful, 21% reported instances of assault and harassment. The police forces in the region have low credibility levels: 65% of the population would approach the police if they had a problem, but only 37% expects equitable treatment. This is worse in Nepal, where only 43% of the population would seek out the police for assistance in case of need.

Freedom from Want

In South Asia the experiments of mass democracy are combined with a situation of mass poverty. These experiences provide the answer two complex questions: first, is a certain degree of material prosperity a precondition to the growth and endurance of democracy? Second, is democracy a reliable instrument for achieving freedom from want?

According to UNDP Human Development Reports, South Asia is still far from achieving freedom from want. Per capita income in the region is less than half the global average and below the average for developing countries. The per capita income levels in Nepal and Bangladesh are four times lower

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than the average global per capita income, while Sri Lanka is almost at the level of developing countries, with a Gross Domestic Product of US$ 4390 per capita vis-à-vis US$ 4775. Levels of literacy and enrolment are also far from the global average, except in Sri Lanka and India. Overall, Nepal shows the worst level of human development in the region.

Nearly 30% of the population lives below the poverty line, despite claims of sharp reductions of poverty levels in the region. Thus, the proportion of people living below the poverty line in India shrank from 39% in 1990 to 26% in 2000, while in Bangladesh it fell from 59% to 50% during the same timeframe. However, these proportions increased in Pakistan and Sri Lanka: while in 1990, the levels of people living below poverty were of 28% and 20% respectively, the proportions increased to 33% and 25% respectively. Paradoxically, all this has happened despite high levels of economic growth: while the world grew at an average rate of 2.6% during 1990-2003, South Asian economies expanded at rates of 5.2%.

The researchers argue that one reason why democracies may not address poverty is that the objective conditions of poverty are not reflected by the subjective perceptions of the people, including the poor themselves: poor people may not think of themselves as poor; and when that does happen, they identify with the aspirations of those above them, stifling demands for redistributive policies.

In the case of South Asia, the survey shows three kinds of mismatch. First, 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. Thus, 58% of the region's population considers that their income

does not meet their needs. This proportion is slightly lower in Nepal, with 52%.

Second, the proportions run counter to the aggregate economic figures for each country. Sri Lanka, which has the highest income per capita in the region, has the largest proportion of those "subjectively" poor, while Bangladesh, showing the highest proportion of people below the poverty line, has the lowest proportion of felt-poverty.

Third, there is a mismatch between where people like to place themselves and where people are placed in the economic hierarchy. There is a tendency towards downward identification in the region, and most people think and say they are poor. Respondents were asked to place themselves on a ten-step ladder: more than 60% placed themselves on the lowest three ranks, while barely 8% of all the respondents placed themselves anywhere in the upper half.

Despite the negative economic indicators, there is a relatively high level of satisfaction among the people with their present economic situation alongside expectations of a better future. According to the survey information, very few are dissatisfied with their economic conditions: 50% of the respondents are satisfied or very satisfied, while 29% expressed dissatisfaction. However, the better the objective conditions, the higher the level of satisfaction.

This lack of correspondence between objective economic conditions and popular consciousness opens up a range of political possibilities. More benign views on one's own conditions reduce pressures on the state, providing room to engage with these issues in the long run. However, this can also be used to disengage from the issue, while complicating political mobilization based on class. In this sense, both democratic and non-democratic regimes in the region have neglected the challenge posed by mass poverty and destitution due to several reasons. First, the issue of poverty has not been adequately articulated in the public domain, and the media tends to mask the systemic nature of poverty. When free from state control, the media tends to favour upper class demands. Second, while poverty is talked about, the poor do not become a category of political mobilization: they tend to be mobilized instead along religious and/or ethnic lines. Third, direct and instrumental control over political actors and organizations by powerful economic interests is an expanding trend all over the region. Fourth, the structure of economic inequality in capitalist systems involves an embedded drag as most of the crucial economic decisions are taken by the private sector. This is compounded by the emergence of independent centres of power and regulation, creating the fear of "capital strike" and "capital flight". Finally, the weakness of accountability mechanisms allows ruling parties to deviate from promises made.

Beginning with Sri Lanka in the early 1980s, all the states in the region have moved away from state-led development strategies, embracing economic reforms and liberalization, privatisation and globalization. These reforms were not preceded by democratic debates and consensus building: the policy changes were achieved by decoupling the economic and the political, isolating some large public policy decisions from public scrutiny.

However, some of these policies are not accepted by the public: 50% of the population rejects both privatisation and down-sizing of the government. Privatisation is most opposed in Sri Lanka and India, and the least opposed in Bangladesh. Nearly 60% of the population opposes the privatisation of public services, and this becomes greater within less privileged groups such as the poor, non-literate and rural dwellers. In spite of this, the opposition to liberalization is much weaker when it does not touch public services or the government. In Nepal, the surveyed population tilted towards favouring the entry of foreign capital while redistributive policies, like putting ceilings of wealth and income, are only slightly favoured. This may be contrasted with Sri Lanka, where it is strongly rejected.

Political Outcomes

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Democracy has produced a set of tangible outcomes: institutions, procedures and a web of laws and rules. In this sense, there exists a widespread acceptance of democratic procedures in the region, making democracy the only legitimate game that everyone aspires to.

However, there is also a set of intangible democratic goods: that becomes crucial: public legitimation of shared values, adherence to norms of accountability by increasing people's confidence in themselves, in their power to mould their life chances and in their perceptions of the validity of democratic procedures. This is what can be called the "culture of democracy" in South Asia.

One of the most significant transformations related to this culture of democracy has to do with the people moving from being subjects to becoming citizens: the right to vote is not only taken seriously, but also the effectiveness of the vote itself. The survey shows that 65% of South Asians consider that their vote makes a difference. In Nepal, this belief is considerably stronger, where 75% of the population considers its vote to be relevant.

More than 60% of the respondents in the region consider that elections are held with relative fairness and Nepal comes out at about at the same level.

Regarding levels of public satisfaction with democratic functioning, people in the region are split between full satisfaction and full dissatisfaction with democracy: except Bangladesh and India, the majorities in the other three countries are not fully satisfied with democracy.

Both in Nepal and Pakistan, a large section of the population is dissatisfied because of the lack of basic necessities, with proportions of 36% and 37% respectively.

It would appear that the workings of democracy have not produced greater attachments to the idea of minority protection: the socio-geographical criss-crossing of identities, which makes everyone a part of a contextual majority and/or minority, results in lower significance attached to democracy in terms of minority protection. The researchers indicate that democracies are becoming majoritarian in more than one sense: apart from the social atmosphere becoming less supportive of minorities and the episodic eruptions of violence between majority and minority communities, the growing invisibility of minorities in public life is a major area of concern.

Another issue is that of national versus regional or provincial identity. Despite the central pressures for a national identity, competitive politics sustains and fosters more localised identities. Thus, the survey indicated that despite a strong sentiment of nationalism in South Asia, found in 53% of respondents, there is also a strong regionalism, represented by 23% of the respondents. The researchers deduce that it is possible people do not want to make clear-cut choices between the national and the regional, as they are proud of both their identities. Identity-based conflicts in recent decades have moulded state formation and governance throughout South Asia.

Links

Democracy Asia Website - http://www.democracy-asia.org/index.htm
Centre for the Study of Developing Societies - http://www.csds.in

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Origins: Why perform a SoD assessment?

This report is the result of a major assessment project, launched by Lokniti, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 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 is to understand not only what democracy has done to South Asia, but also what South Asia has done to democracy.

Partners and Form

This comprehensive report on the state of democracy includes the results of an assessment conducted in 5 South Asian countries.
The methodology includes cross-section surveys, dialogues with political activists, case studies, and qualitative assessments modelled by the IDEA Assessment Framework.
The research was supported by the Lokniti, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, International IDEA, the Department of Sociology of Oxford University, the EU, and the Ford Foundation.

The Assessment Structure
Inspired by the International IDEA Assessment Framework, the South Asia State of Democracy research team developed another framework divided in four areas: the economic, social and cultural domain; the state institutional domain; the party political domain, and the non-party political domain. This structure, in turn, gave rise to the ten areas into which the report is divided.

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