

STRUCTURAL PROBLEMS THAT SOUTH ASIAN DEMOCRACIES FACE

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The South Asian region is witnessing some kind of democratic upsurge. For the first time, all the countries in the region have embraced democracy. Yet, democratic transitions in the region are filled with uncertainties and fragility. Although elections are held at regular intervals in a free and fair manner with record participation from citizens, the democratic and electoral processes are beset with serious challenges. Issues of violence, corruption, lack of governance, flawed systems of representation, the role of money, dynastic and family-centred politics seem to be eroding the initial democratic gains in most countries of the region.

South Asia as a regional entity presents two challenges: The disparate levels of democracy and development between South Asian nations; and the disparities within the South Asian nations. While there is widespread acceptance that democratic and developmental deficits should be addressed within individual nation states, there is much less acceptance of the idea that disparities between countries in such geographical proximity and with shared borders might jeopardize the prospects for democracy or development in each country.



Terrorism or, more broadly speaking, the problem of security is undoubtedly the most significant and overarching challenge in South Asia at the moment. The security problem in the region has many layers, which in the recent past have become intermingled in complex ways. There are at least three sets of causal factors that contribute to this problem.

The first involves developmental deficits, which arise, in turn, out of institutional deficits. The second involves the situation of minorities all over South Asia. The conflicts in Kashmir and Sri Lanka as well as other insurgencies inside India – and until recently in Nepal – are indicative of these tensions between states and minority populations. The third involves the effects of US foreign policy and democracy promotion projects and their symbiotic relationship with the global rise of extremist Islam.

A second set of challenges involves incomplete democratic transitions which result in the inadequate development of the institutions of formal democracy. This is evident primarily in Afghanistan, but also in the Maldives, Bhutan and Nepal albeit to different degrees.

A third set of challenges involves the failure of institutions to fulfil their democratic mandates, such as the present state of the parliament in Pakistan, the functioning of judicial systems all over South Asia, abuse of power by state institutions, and so on.



A fourth critical challenge arises from the disparities in the nature of the South Asian democracies. India and Sri Lanka have ensured reasonable electoral democracy and a fair amount of political stability with a free press and an Independent judiciary, but the transfer of power to the people has not been deep enough. The institutions of democracy that were meant to serve citizens have in many cases become instruments of misgovernance. Pakistan and Bangladesh have had a meandering path to democracy. Even during periods of formal democracy, the script is often determined by the armed forces. Nepal's experience with constitutional monarchy was not conducive to parliamentary democracy. In Bhutan and Maldives, democracy is still in its infancy but current movements in Bhutan, Maldives and Nepal have generated revolutionary aspirations. The challenge for the political leadership of these countries is to consolidate democratic gains through constitutional and institutional arrangements and to ensure the legitimate interests of the historically marginalized. In Afghanistan, the forces of extremism, fundamentalism and terrorism are so strong that powerful members of the international community are engaged in a collective manner in promoting and ensuring sustainable democracy in a hostile environment.

The fifth critical challenge to democracy in South Asia is the pervasive failure of human development. In fact, many of the challenges outlined above derive from developmental deficits, although a narrow view of development and development deficits will not assist democratic progress.



The main challenge for democracy in South Asia is the contradiction between the ever-increasing robustness of its civil society and the deep inequities and developmental deficits that prevent the majority of this civil society from effective democratic participation and inclusion.