Summary

State of Democracy in South Asia: Sri Lanka

With its better record of human development and long tradition of political activism on the Left, Sri Lanka should be well on the road to deepening democracy. However, two decades of ethnic conflict pose the biggest democratic challenge. The State of Democracy in South Asia points to the major successes and shortcomings of democracy in Sri Lanka and makes some recommendations in order to strengthen Sri Lanka's democratic capacity and to allow it to handle diversity in a soundly democratic way.

Key Recommendations:

- Inclusive nationalism must be cultivated, while Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarianism must be handled appropriately.
- Militarization of the state must be addressed urgently.
- Federal arrangements can potentially improve power sharing and satisfy ethnic aspirations.
- Devolution of power and redefinition of central national authority need to be on the agenda.
- Presidentialism and proportional representation should be re-examined.

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 receives widespread support: 88% of the citizens surveyed from the five South Asia countries consider that democracy is suitable for them, though it was seen to be less so in Pakistan and Nepal. In Sri Lanka, this proportion amounts to 92%.

The data also indicates that Sri Lanka and India show the strongest levels of support for democracy. However, in both countries, there is a favourable view of strong personal leadership and expert rule.

Religion shows up as a major factor: 40% of the surveyed population in South Asia agree that religious leaders, rather than politicians, should be empowered to make decisions. This trend is stronger in Bangladesh and Pakistan. Yet, this preference does not cut across religious lines, and differs from country to country: Muslims in Sri Lanka are the most supportive of democracy, while Muslims in Pakistan are the least, and Hindus in India, Nepal and Pakistan show stark differences in their levels of support for democracy.

At a regional level, 26% of the respondents may be identified as "strong democrats", and 22% as "non-democrats". Nevertheless, the sum of "strong" and "weak" democrats in the five countries outnumbers "non-democrats". Sri Lanka and India have the highest levels of strong 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 Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan, support democracy more than women; and urban dwellers – especially in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, 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 provided in democracies 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. This explains why the capacity to provide for basic necessities appears to be the most essential attribute of democracy according to 39% of the respondents; then followed by equal rights, preferred by 37% of the surveyed population. This trend is stronger amongst non-elites and the poor, while elites stress equal

rights and power to change governments as being important.

The language of "rights" is tilted away from the individual, more towards that of the community. The assessment team considers that the experience of modern politics has been a factor in this trend. 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.

Democracy as a form of government appears to be seen more in terms of popular control of government than other notions such as the rule of law.

Although South Asians ascribe to democracy the attributes and characteristics mentioned above, 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. 57% of the respondents in Sri Lanka can articulate what democracy means to some extent, while the South Asian average is 47%.

From Promise to Design

Constitutional arrangements in South Asia do not seem to 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 the power of traditional social norms and structures that threatened to block the expansion of democracy.
- Colonial and monarchical (in the case of Nepal) arrangements were used as effective instruments of regulation to preserve the new state.
- Finally, colonial and monarchical institutions were seen by the elites as assuring 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. The constitutions of Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan include special provisions to protect and safeguard religious minorities, while the Nepalese constitution does not recognize minorities at all.

In spite of the above-mentioned legal 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 – Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Islam in Pakistan and Bangladesh, 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, an 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 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, this is effective only in Sri Lanka and India.

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 *India, Pakistan* and *Nepal*, while *Sri Lanka* adopted it more extensively after 1978. However, the expected *effects on 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.

The conduct of free and fair elections has been a more complicated issue in the region, as in Sri Lanka, where the electoral commission has not been able to fully demonstrate independence as it is appointed at the discretion of the President.

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 even involving senior political officers have become common. Corruption reaches both the judiciary and the military.

A major example of constitutional deviation occurred in Sri Lanka with the Sinhala *Only Act*, 1956, which subverted the "safeguard clause" for minorities enshrined by the Soulbury Constitution (at the time of independence in 1948). This act violated the parity of status between Sinhala and Tamil languages, which was only partially restored in later years.

Finally, in 2006 the media in Sri Lanka was considered "partially 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 Sri Lanka, trust is based on a longer experience of 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 with the courts and Electoral Commissions. – though Pakistan is the exception. 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.

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 in the population, and more on political experience and social position. In Sri Lanka, the ethnic divide is crucial: Tamils in general show low levels of trust. The rise of a majoritarian ethic and the last 25 years of violent strife are crucial to understanding this situation.

According to the researchers, one of the main reasons for the low levels of trust in parties and parliaments could be that they are not representative: besides appearing as elite-captured institutions, there appears to be a lack of presence and representation of all sectors in society.

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. The different identities and religious differences became more assertive as consequence of colonial policies. The resultant tensions have become built into the nature of nationalism in the region.

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. This feeling is more intense in Pakistan. At the same time, the sense of pride in regional or ethnic identity is very strong too, particularly in Pakistan. Sri Lanka, on the other hand, presents levels of national pride than fall slightly below the regional average. However, this does not seem to affect its level of regional pride, for which the country presents a median value. Moreover, both forms of identification are similar in quantitative terms. The function of the market and the different shares in the benefits derived from 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, the tensions and struggles are still visible and the inner boundaries are still changing.

These tensions also trouble Sri Lanka and Nepal, where unitary states were established. In Sri Lanka, the preference for Sinhala alienated the Tamil people further by the refusal to devolve power and resources to the latter. However, there is an increasing acceptance of federal norms and development of innovative mechanisms for settling the contested claims between the union and the regional units. In this sense, the elite and political establishment favour a negotiated agreement with the Tamils. There is also awareness that greater autonomous decision-making is permitted *de facto* in Sri Lanka.

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 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.

According to the survey, nearly half the respondents could not offer any response to whether they thought of themselves as majority or minority, while in Sri Lanka, this distinction was unknown to less than 25% of the respondents. Of the respondents who were cognisant of the distinction, almost 40% recognised themselves as belonging to a minority. As one participant of a Dialogue on Democracy in Sri Lanka noted, this could be due to the limitations of the majority-minority discourse in a society that has minorities within majorities and majorities within minorities.

There is 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 concept of "minority/majority" and identified

themselves in line with the majority/minority status of their religion.
- In Sri Lanka, 43% of the majority community saw itself as a minority.

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 - Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Islam in Pakistan and Bangladesh, Hinduism in Nepal- despite formal commitments to fair treatment of all religious communities. This duality provides a source of confusion in policy responses: in Sri Lanka, the question of minorities is often relegated to the background, as the major cleavage is established between Sinhala and Tamils. However, policy processes are dominated by Buddhist concerns. Muslims of Sri Lanka, who happen to be Tamil speaking, have managed to achieve some concessions in education matters and political power by defecting from the Tamil cause.

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, and is championed by India and, to a lesser degree, Nepal.

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 partition and civil war, which the treatment of Tamils produced in Sri Lanka.

The third, and dominant model, is that of majoritarianism. This response appears to be linked to the support of 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 believe that minorities should adopt the ways of the majority community.
- The proportions of majoritarians in Sri Lanka and Pakistan exceed those who take a pro-diversity position, while respect for minority concerns and rights is more pronounced in Bangladesh and India;
- 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 Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, 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 allows political parties in the region to organize resistance and lead struggles.

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

After independence, all of them assumed central roles in designing and managing the 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 coalitional 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 decades and party systems have undergone major changes. Although major political parties and labels have survived, the structure of competition has changed dramatically. Sri Lanka is the only country in the region that does not have a First-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system; a system that is used to keep the number of significant political parties close to two. However, despite the presence of about 50 political parties in Sri Lanka, the effective number of parties is less than three. Nevertheless, due to the inability of the major parties to win the confidence of Tamil population in Sri Lanka, a virtually parallel party system has emerged in the Tamil speaking areas of the country. Therefore, it is not possible to treat the country´s electoral system as a two-party or bipolar system.

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 South Asia's population identify themselves with a political party, which is slightly higher in Sri Lanka, at 50%.
The demise of one-party dominance has led to coalition politics and the need to find support from smaller parties. Moreover, all political parties in the region face two challenges dealing with spatial and social diversity. First, diversity and public expectations in each country result in competitive politics sharpening differences and running against unified notions of a common citizenry. Second, weakness in party organizations reduces their ability to address a broad range of 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 all this, dissatisfaction with political parties, both as vehicles for representation and agencies for governance, has increased. This fluid and unstructured nature of party political space has meant increased citizen involvement, but also vulnerability of parties to determined intervention by vested social interests, national and global capital and organised crime. Thus, 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 mechanisms for leadership renewal and the renewal of senior office holders. Parties that become autocratic and centralized organizations or powerful political dynasties are able to develop both at the national and regional levels. Some famous examples are the Bandaranaikes in Sri Lanka, the Nehru family in India, the Bhuttos in Pakistan and the close followers of Mujib-ur Rahman and Zia-ur Rahman in Bangladesh.

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, to ensure 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. This proportion is higher in Sri Lanka, at 22%.

Trade union membership is less extensive amongst the 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 work force 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 indicate they have participated in protests, struggles or movements. This proportion is slightly lower in Sri Lanka, at 17%.

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, and in Sri Lanka 11% of the respondents report participating in them.

Women's organizations are very strong in Sri Lanka, with 31% of the women surveyed reporting their participation in such organizations.

The researchers found that party and non-party organizations actually overlap. Nearly 50% of trade union activists in Sri Lanka, and 75% in India identify themselves with a political party. The relationship between protest activity and party identification is even stronger: 60% of the protesters in Sri Lanka identify themselves with a political party. Finally, large numbers of protesters, 68% of the respondents in the case of Sri Lanka, also identify themselves as campaigners:

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. This proportion doubles in Sri Lanka, with 60% of the respondents reporting participation in such organizations.

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 Buddhist clergy and its organizations in Sri Lanka; the Majils, Jammat-e-Islami or the Tabligh in Pakistan and Bangladesh; the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal in India), 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 Sri Lanka, since early 1980s, various Tamil groups have resorted to violence and armed struggle in the effort to counter the Sinhala dominated state.

In general, there is popular support for the issues and demands raised by armed insurgents like the Maoist: 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 their methods. Thus, peaceful and negotiated solutions are preferred: this is the case in Sri Lanka, where all ethnic and religious groups, including the Sinhala, favour negotiations over a military solution to end the conflict.

There is a strong ongoing debate about 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 shifting the issue 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 higher in Sri Lanka, at 14%.

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 Sri Lanka and India, and lowest in Nepal. The feeling of insecurity in the latter 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 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 proportion is slightly lower in Sri Lanka, with 36%.

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 Sri Lanka and India. In Bangladesh, India and Nepal, men were equally divided over women's safety in the workplace; while in Pakistan the proportion of men that considers it unsafe are double those who consider it safe for women at the workplace. More women in Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan thought it was unsafe at work, 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 Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan. 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, peoples' 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 community violence, while people from specific regions are more concerned about issues of war and terrorism: the northern areas of Sri Lanka; the Sylhet region in Bangladesh; the Hindi heartlands in India, and the central Tarai in Nepal.

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.

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, yet only 37% expects equitable treatment. Sri Lanka shows a high level of confidence in the police force, with 82% of the population willing to approach the police in case of need.

Freedom from Want

In South Asia, the experiments of mass democracy are combined with a situation of mass poverty. This experience can be crucial to answer two of the most complex questions of our time: 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 very far away from achieving freedom from want. Per capita income in the region, is less than half the global average, and still below the average for developing countries. Sri Lanka is the best performer in the region. Nepal and Bangladesh record less than 25% of the 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 averages, except for Sri Lanka and India.

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 time frame. However, these proportions increased in Sri Lanka and Pakistan: 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 might identify themselves 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 higher in Sri Lanka, with 65%.

Second, the proportions run counter to the aggregate economic figures for each country. Sri Lanka, the country with 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 of one's own condition reduce pressures on the state, providing room to engage with these issues in the long run. However, this can 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 separate 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: these policy changes were achieved by decoupling the economic and the political, isolating some large public policy decisions from public scrutiny, or simply through double discourse.

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 more intense 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. Thus, with the exception of Sri Lanka and India, more people, particularly in Pakistan and Bangladesh, favour the entry of foreign capital than not. And redistributive policies, such as putting ceilings on wealth and income, find more favour in

India and Bangladesh, while these are strongly rejected in Sri Lanka.

Political Outcomes

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. In this sense, the survey shows that 65% of South Asians consider that their vote makes a difference. Sri Lanka presents the exact same proportion.

More than 60% of the respondents in the region consider that elections are held with relative fairness, in Sri Lanka this proportion also rests around 60%.

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

In the case of Sri Lanka, complaints about democracy are strongly related to the lack of basic living standards (17% of the population), and the lack of equal rights (12%).

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 the 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. The wider number of nationalists must be noted in order to explain South Asian politics. Identity based conflicts in recent decades have moulded state formation and governance throughout South Asia during the last decades: ethno-identity politics in Sri Lanka had a "peaceful" democratic beginning, but resulted in civil war and violence.

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.

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.

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.