

Sustaining democracy in South Asia



Regional Diary

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With Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal, one could see a trend in South Asia's path towards democracy. Where is the problem in regions democratic pursuit?

Last week, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih took the oath as the seventh President of Maldives. In September 2018, in a surprising turn of events, Maldives voted against Abdulla Yameen, then the President and politically a strong man.

Not many expected that Yameen would lose the September elections in Maldives. Ten years ago, in 2008, a similar development took place in Maldives. Mohammad Nasheed, an activist who had formed a political party a few years earlier, contested against Abdul Gayoom, then the longest-serving President of Maldives (since 1978), and won the elections in 2008.

The 2008 election results were also a surprise; Abdul Gayoom, another strong man then (now a voice of democracy in the Maldives!), lost the election to Nasheed. However, Nasheed could not finish his tenure as the President; there were a conspiracy and a coup, leading to Nasheed's ouster. Subsequently, under in a shameful trial, Nasheed was convicted of "terrorism" and sentenced for 13 years. 2013 elections in the Maldives witnessed Abdulla Yameen in becoming the President; he made the Presidency stronger and more undemocratic than Abdul Gayoom.

After getting elected through a popular mandate, will the new President of Maldives, Ibrahim Solih succeed where Mohammad Nasheed had failed earlier? Will Solih be able to deepen democracy and strengthen the institutions in the Maldives?

The New Democracy Springs in South Asia

One could trace a parallel in what is happening in Sri Lanka. In 2015 January, a similar democratic spring took place in Sri Lanka. Mahinda Rajapaksa, the then President and another strongman, was defeated in Sri Lanka's Presidential election by Maithripala Sirisena. The latter could not have won without the support from Ranil Wickremesinghe, the leader of United National Party (UNP); subsequently in the following Parliamentary elections during the same year in 2015, Ranil became the Prime Minister.

By the last quarter of 2015, everyone inside and outside Sri Lanka was celebrating the arrival of the new political duo - Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, and the fall of Mahinda Rajapaksa. There was a belief and an expectation under Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, Sri Lanka would move into a new era of democracy, accountability, devolution of powers and the rule of law.

Three years down the island lane, in the last quarter of 2018, where does Sri Lanka stand on the above? President Sirisena conspired with the former President Rajapaksa to overthrow Wickremesinghe. In a shameful series of incidents, that would make the palace conspiracies of the late Mughal period a utopia, Sirisena appointed Rajapaksa as the Prime Minister. Subsequently, Sirisena prorogued the Parliament and announced new elections in January 2019.

Thankfully the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka stepped in. It stayed the dissolution of the Parliament. Rajapaksa, who was appointed by Sirisena had to face the no-confidence motion against him, which he could not defend.

While one expected with the loss of vote in Parliament and the Supreme Court's verdict, Sirisena and Rajapaksa would back off and let the democratic process continue, it did not happen. Not until now.

There are two Prime Ministers in Sri Lanka, and the President is siding with one and acting against another who is constitutionally elected. This is where Sri Lanka stays in the third week of November 2018.

The case in Bangladesh is no better. The two leading parties - Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh National Party (BNP) stand completely polarised, with two Begums - Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia refusing to pursue any decent political dialogue that is expected in a Parliamentary democracy between the leader of the government and that of the opposition.



the controversial nature of the previous election (held in 2014), there was an expectation that 2018 election for the Parliament would be inclusive.

In 2014, Khaleda Zia's BNP and other opposition parties boycotted the elections, leading the Awami League returning to the Parliament unopposed. Earlier, the AL had won the Parliamentary elections in 2009. The AL and the opposition parties share diametrically opposite views on domestic governance, and relations with India, Myanmar and China. Economic and development issues facing Bangladesh, along with the problem of radicalisation and Rohingya refugees pose a severe challenge to the governance process to the country.

One would expect a basic political dialogue between the two leading parties - BNP and AL, as Bangladesh is on the eve of next Parliamentary elections. Unfortunately, it does not exist; given the deep hatred between the two Begums, it is unlikely to take place.

Bangladesh is entering into a disturbing democratic phase in December 2018.

Nepal's democratic process has also been troubled since 2001, following the Palace massacre in Kathmandu and the abolition of monarchy in 2007. Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) became the largest party following the April 2008 elections.

Did the end of monarchy in 2007 and the elections in 2008 establish Nepal into a stable democracy? Unfortunately no. The fact that Nepal witnessed more than ten Prime Ministers during the last ten years will tell a different story. Nepali Congress led the government twice during the previous ten years with GP Koirala and Sher Bahadur Deuba being the PMs during 2008, 2017-18 respectively.

The Communists who had formed the non-Nepali Congress governments were divided under the following banners: Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist); Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist); and Nepal Communist Party. Pushpa Kamal Dahal alias Prachanda became the Prime Minister twice during 2008-09, and August-June 2017; Madhav Kumar Nepal, Jhala Nath Khanal, Baburam Bhattarai, and KP Oli also became the Prime Ministers since 2008.

Making of a new constitution has become a real controversy for Nepal. With a vast ongoing political divide in the Madhesi region and a disastrous earthquake in 2015, substantial governance problems are facing Nepal.

KP Oli, the present Prime Minister, is walking a tightrope, ever since he became the Prime Minister in February 2018. There are no ready-made solutions for Nepal, nor the political elite has come together to have a homemade solution.

So which side will Nepal go? With the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal, one could see a trend in South Asia's path towards democracy. If Pakistan and Afghanistan are included, then one would be able to appreciate the issue in the region.

Where is the problem in South Asia's democratic pursuit?

Issues in Sustaining Democracy in South Asia: The Sinister Six

Before one starts looking for answers, one should identify where the problems are in South Asia in sustaining democracy.

South Asia - between the political party that has formed the government and the main opposition party. Bangladesh highlights this divide between the ruling and opposition parties - the AL and BNP. In the case of Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal, there are different faultlines between the ruling and opposition parties.

Second, and the most critical problem - is that of the personalities - between the ruling and opposition parties, and within them. Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan, Mahinda Rajapaksa and Ranil Wickremesinghe reflect the growing political intolerance that further gets down to the parties at the grassroots level. The personality and ego clashes have been undermining democracy in South Asia - both at the federal and provincial levels.

Third, is the emergence of strong men within the democracies in South Asia. Mahinda Rajapaksa and Abdulla Yameen in Sri Lanka and the Maldives represent this phenomenon in recent years. Both Rajapaksa and Yameen were elected as the Presidents democratically and through constitutional means. However, once they got elected, they abused their authority, gained more power and became the strong men within the democratic folds.

Fourth are the weak institutions, especially the Parliament and Judiciary. The emergence of undisputed political leadership within the party system, the ability of these leaders to gain more power through legal and political means - also result in side-lining and weakening the institutions. Though the judiciary is designed as one of the strong pillars of the South Asian parliamentary system, over the years, in most of the countries, their independence has been eroded. Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh and Pakistan have all had weak judiciaries. Only in the recent period, one is witnessing the emergence of a strong judiciary. In other countries, except for India, the Supreme Courts remain weak in taking crucial decisions in protecting the Constitution.

Fifth is the role of the Deep State. Though Pakistan remains notorious for the role of the Deep State, one could witness the same phenomenon. Sections of military, bureaucracy and intelligence come together to chart a particular course of action; they subjugate all constitutional processes and authorities - covertly and sometimes even overtly. They choose weak men as an opportunity and catapult them to power; in return, the latter yields to the former's dictates within democracies. On the other hand, strong men are made stronger by the Deep State.

Sixth, the role of external powers. During the Cold War, the US played a dirty role in promoting non-democratic regimes to pursue their own interests in the region. Washington's support to military rulers in Pakistan was a part of this pursuit. Now China carries the mantle in South Asia, through huge infrastructural projects, and what is now increasingly being referred to as the debt diplomacy. Beijing's support to Mahinda Rajapaksa and Abdulla Yameen were well known. China supported these leaders with huge infrastructural projects; in paper, billions came into the country. Only resulting in compounding the debt problems of these countries - for example, Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

New elections for the Parliament have been announced already for December 2018. Ironically, the leader of the opposition party (Khaleida Zia) is jailed and her son self-exiled. Given

One could quickly identify the following six factors. First, the basic understanding of Parliamentary politicking between the main political parties. This has been the primary problem in

The problems of democracy in South Asia are well known. However, the issue is to find solutions towards the same. Else, the region will continue to walk the same path.