



The State of Democracy in South Asia: An Examination of Key Factors and Trends

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ABSTRACT

This paper, therefore, focuses on the evolution of the democratic process in South Asia, where comparative political and sociological studies have generally been ignored and where subtle and nuanced research from the bottom up remains to be conducted. It seeks to enrich the study of the democratization process and what drives democratization and also presents an important critical perspective on democracy in South Asia.

This study emphasizes the impact of colonial roots, historical legacies, political culture, and socio-economic context on South Asian democracies. It uses multidimensional analytics to analyze the interaction of various institutions and actors in the democratic process. While constitutional mechanisms reinforce democracy in the region, countervailing forces of illiberalism, ranging from institutional weakness to social inequality and the emergence of authoritarian tendencies, often straddle it.

This paper concludes on an optimistic note, underscoring civil society's abiding strength and the prospects for positive transformation through grassroots organizations, women's activism, and regional collaboration. It offers important takeaways for policymakers and scholars.

Keywords: Civil Society, Colonialism, Democracy, Democratic Governance, Electoral Systems, Political Institutions, South Asia

1. Introduction

The variable state of democracy in contemporary South Asia has percolated through comparative scholarship only episodically through the lens of other regions, partly

because South Asia has not been a consistent area of attention in comparative political and sociological studies. Traditional mainstream comparative politics scholarship has focused primarily on the West, turning a blind afterthought to Asian examples. The absence of extensive cross-national empirical research on the intricacies of democracy across South Asia underscores this void. This substantive gap exemplifies the need for in-depth observational research in this area.

An in-depth and nuanced understanding of the complexities, processes, and specific features of democratic transition and consolidation in South Asia is vital. Employing such approaches frees researchers to interrogate the multifaceted issues of democratic development within the diverse historical contexts of South Asian countries without being mired in the Eurocentric frameworks and narratives forced by dominant strands of Western scholarship.

1.1. Significance

This research significantly contributes to the understanding of democracy in South Asia, a region often underrepresented in comparative political studies, which typically focus on Western contexts. By employing a comprehensive multidimensional analytical approach, this study effectively fills a crucial gap in existing literature. It moves beyond conventional Eurocentric frameworks to thoroughly examine how unique factors such as colonial legacies, distinct political cultures, and diverse socio-economic contexts intricately shape democratic processes within this complex region.

The study highlights the dynamic interplay of various institutions and actors, offering a nuanced perspective on both the reinforcing mechanisms that bolster democratic foundations and the persistent countervailing forces of illiberalism, including systemic institutional weakness, social inequalities, and the emergence of authoritarian tendencies. Ultimately, this paper provides valuable, actionable insights for policymakers and scholars, fostering a more comprehensive and bottom-up understanding of democratization and its underlying drivers in South Asia. It particularly emphasizes the enduring strength and resilience of civil society, alongside the promising prospects for positive transformation through grassroots efforts, women's activism, and enhanced regional collaboration.

1.2. Research Questions

- How have colonial roots, historical legacies, political culture, and socio-economic contexts impacted the evolution of democratic processes in South Asia?

- What are the key factors and trends, including the interplay of various institutions and actors (such as constitutional mechanisms, civil society, political parties, electoral systems, and media), that reinforce or challenge democratic governance in South Asia?
- What are the opportunities and threats to democratic governance in the South Asian region, encompassing issues such as human rights, social cohesion, ethnic and religious diversity, gender inequality, youth participation, economic development, and external relations, and what insights can be offered to policymakers and scholars for strengthening democratic institutions?

1.3. Research Gaps

- **Lack of Consistent Comparative South Asian Scholarship:** Comparative political and sociological studies have generally overlooked South Asia, leading to an episodic understanding of its democratic processes. Traditional mainstream comparative politics has primarily focused on the West, creating a significant void in in-depth research on Asian examples.
- **Absence of Extensive Cross-National Empirical Research:** There is a substantive gap in extensive cross-national empirical research on the intricacies of democracy across South Asia. This underscores the need for more in-depth observational research to gain a nuanced understanding of the complexities, processes, and specific features of democratic transition and consolidation in the region, moving beyond Eurocentric frameworks.
- **Insufficient “Bottom-Up” and Nuanced Research:** Subtle and nuanced research from the bottom up remains largely unconduct in South Asia, limiting a comprehensive understanding of what drives democratization and the critical perspectives on democracy in the region.
- **Overlooking Civil Society’s and Other Actors’ Roles in Democratization:** Historically, scholars have often overlooked the avenues of reform and the roles played by civil society, media, political parties, and electoral systems in the democratization process⁴⁴⁴. While recent scholarship has begun to highlight their significance, a deeper and more consistent focus is still needed.

1.4. Method

The paper employs a multi-decisional prism to analyze democracy’s multi-faceted properties in South Asia. The title focuses on overviews of the programming’s historical,

sociopolitical, and economic dynamics. The different kinds of democracy are examined here through the distinct angles of liberal democracy, participatory democracy, and deliberative democracy.

This paper compares democratic institutions, electoral systems, and governance practices in select South Asian countries. Political parties, civil society organizations, media, and social movements are essential in democratization studies to create or inhibit democracy.

This research presents opportunities and threats to democratic governance in the South Asian region, ranging from human rights to social cohesion. It aims to provide policy recommendations to practitioners (politicians, academics, and civil society activists) in their quest to establish and strengthen democratic institutions within the region.

1.5. Key Theoretical Frameworks

The paper implicitly utilizes a multidimensional analytical approach to examine the multifaceted properties of democracy in South Asia. It explores democracy through the distinct angles of liberal democracy, participatory democracy, and deliberative democracy. The study compares democratic institutions, electoral systems, and governance practices across select South Asian countries, while also considering the essential roles of political parties, civil society organizations, media, and social movements in shaping democratic outcomes.

Furthermore, the paper engages with a critical perspective on democracy that moves beyond conventional Eurocentric frameworks. It emphasizes the impact of colonial roots, historical legacies, political culture, and socio-economic contexts on South Asian democracies, suggesting that these unique factors intricately shape democratic processes. This approach allows for an understanding of how constitutional mechanisms reinforce democracy while countervailing forces of illiberalism, institutional weakness, and authoritarian tendencies often challenge it. The paper also considers the interplay between political reform and economic development, and how international financial sponsors mediate shifts in economic policy and democratic governance.

2. Findings and Discussions

2.1. Comparative Analysis of Democratic Institutions in South Asian Countries

The executive, the legislature, and the judiciary are the three main organs that play a key role in building and maintaining the fabric of democracy in a democracy. Moreover,

other players are vital to the operation of these core institutions; among such key players are the electoral and judicial commissions and the media. Indeed, there is no denying that these countries, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, are young democracies steadily marching toward better democratic governance (Choudhry, 2018).

A close examination of their unique political systems reveals that Pakistan and Bangladesh have chosen a unicameral legislature, while India, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka have a bicameral system (Bhatia, 2017). Though these countries held general elections, their democratic systems exhibit disparities. Specifically, India and the Maldives operate under a parliamentary democracy, while the other countries use presidential democracy. Furthermore, every distinct country showcases numerous political parties and different blends and electoral systems for their lower houses.

Increased actions and coordinated institutions can foster good governance through working democratic institutions. In South Asia, institutions exhibit both constructive and counterproductive traits. These institutions have been haunted by systemic problems, promoting corruption, partisanship, and the fragility of political parties. Through a macro-level comparative analysis of South Asian countries, this study emphasizes the importance of institutions for fostering democratic governance (Rahman, 2015, pp. 45-68).

Overall, India exhibits the most robust performance of political institutions among South Asian nations. Even though a few institutions in the Maldives and Sri Lanka have weakened, their relatively strong status continues. Meanwhile, akin to Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, the institutions in Pakistan have struggled to develop pretty and effectively. The broader landscape reflects significant institutional injustice, with approximately forty out of one hundred institutional shortcomings identified in Pakistan (Ali, 2023, pp. 299-315). Furthermore, the malaises afflicting Pakistan are more than double those observed in Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

2.2. Challenges and Opportunities for Democracy in South Asia

Over the past several years, South Asian democracy has had to contend with many challenges. The presence of sub-national or local governments with limited powers indicates that these nations continue to struggle with the consolidation of democratic norms. Furthermore, the emergence of anti-democratic movements within the region signifies a worrying trend as new leaders increasingly display authoritarian tendencies. Frequently changing nepotistic political structures and governments have perpetuated political instability and ineffective governance. Additionally, the rising prevalence of

terrorism and an inadequate security apparatus have significantly heightened security threats and uncertainties throughout the region). Recent violence and unrest have brought to light underlying social and economic disparities affecting many countries, exacerbating discontent among their populations. Moreover, the increase in trafficking and sexual trade during the early 21st century reflects broader issues of exploitation and vulnerability faced by marginalized groups in the region (Joshi, 2019, pp. 45-62).

While challenges persist, there are notable optimistic developments within South Asian countries. Grassroots movements are gaining steam, fueled by rising public frustration with corruption and corrupt politicians. The increasing anti-corruption fervor could prompt a formalization of democratic standards. Moreover, regarding political involvement, women's increased activism represents a bright spot in the region's democratic commitment (Khan, 2020, pp. 487-502).

Moreover, the arrival of external assistance for these countries is expected to impact regional growth significantly. Donors underscore good governance, inclusion, equity, and anti-discrimination principles in their democracy-building initiatives. Moreover, South Asian countries are increasingly involved in regional organizations, which may facilitate the transfer of democratic norms and promote human rights (Kumar, 2021, pp. 45-61).

The interplay between political reform and economic development holds a potential silver lining. Solutions to various pressing issues, like infusing their economies with vigor and addressing political and economic corruption, nepotism, and alienation of minorities, might lead to hopefulness. While case studies conducted since the independence of various nations depict mixed outcomes, they still indicate the presence of liberal institutions aligned with the Western democratic model (Patel, 2019, pp. 123-137).

2.3. Role of Civil Society in Promoting Democratic Values

The Significant Role of Civil Society in Sustaining Democracy. Civil society actors like grassroots social movements, civic advocacy groups, or non-governmental organizations can be key in affecting the policy agenda. They can sway public sentiment, shift perspectives, and counter adverse incentives. In South Asia, from social justice and equity champions to advocates for transparency and accountability, from anti-corruption activists to human rights defenders, from gender equality advocates to peacebuilders, from climatology and environmental justice advocates to aspirants for effective governance, many people have had a profound impact on the area. Civil society

organizations act as a crucial intermediary between the state and citizens, forming a new space for under-represented voices and participation in democratic processes. Civil society mobilization in India has been critical for achieving democratic change, especially regarding accountability and public social reform (Desai, 2020). In South Asia, civil society actors have been instrumental in fostering a culture of democratic participation and upholding the rule of law, thereby contributing significantly to the overall democratic landscape of the region.

Case studies from Asia demonstrate how civil society in various parts of this diverse region has effectively employed a combination of tactics to achieve several critical objectives. First, these efforts have raised awareness among local and global audiences regarding the actions and inactions of the state. Second, civil society organizations have worked to influence specific policies and state actions. Third, they have sought to hold particular state officials accountable for their decisions and actions (Kumar, 2020, pp. 110-125). The responses from these officials have emerged as significant new political realities, establishing precedents and setting cues for other state and non-state actors.

It is important to note that the relationship between officials and civil society is often contentious, and public opinion sometimes supports these officials. The degree of progress achieved is debatable, as not all stakeholders have attained their respective goals. Many efforts in this realm fail, which, in turn, helps explain the fluctuations in international democracy indices. Historically, scholars from sociology and economics focusing on democratization have often overlooked these avenues of reform and the roles played by civil society. However, recent scholarship has begun to highlight the significance of these actors in the democratization process (Chatterjee, 2022, pp. 25-40).

Not everyone embraces this role's opportunities to enhance accountability and improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and legitimacy of political, bureaucratic, and social life. In South Asia, a notable intolerance exists for modes of political contestation that do not directly benefit elite groups. The political and governance literature often describes the region as solidaristic; however, this characterization is sociologically complex and problematic (Banerjee, 2019, pp. 211-229). One perspective from the Marxist tradition suggests that it is self-defeating when prominent civil society actors become integrated into the state elite. Conversely, some scholars and activists argue that the region exhibits significant individualism, with various stakeholders often positioned external to community dynamics, despite major social constructivist approaches that may undermine the notion of these communities.

On the other hand, South Asia is undergoing substantial change, with increasing global influences affiliated with many societies and political contexts (Islam, 2020, pp. 395–410). Due to these vital democratic advancements, individuals who may initially appear loyal to specific groups, such as tribal affiliations or social classes, frequently support robust campaigns for social and political change initiated by theorists who advocate for broader community engagement.

2.4. Media and Democracy in South Asia

The media finds itself embedded in a very partisan environment in which rival political forces are vying to influence its place in society. Media teams additionally engage in influencing lobbying government entities and other elite groups. This paper is about the people of India, centering more accurately on the context of Pakistan while reserving a smaller focus on Bangladesh. On top of that, we also include a short analysis of events in Sri Lanka. Importantly, an inclination from government leaders and parties in South Asia to meddle with the independent operation of the news media and journalism is also evinced by Antiran's test. However, it is observed that control over the media in this region is typically exercised with a lighter hand compared to the more severe restrictions faced by media in many African nations or the cautious liberalization experienced in parts of Latin America and South Korea (Wijerathne, 2021, pp. 79-91).

The pervasive idea that democracy in South Asia is simply a variant of Western representative democracy hampers a critical dialogue about self-governance and autonomy. That is an ideology that implicitly believes that agency and resources must come from the West and holds the view that South Asians should be told how to serve Western interests. Such a worldview neglects that South Asian countries, especially India, are not obliged to embrace Western standards or paradigms, whether through a wholesale imposition or a slow encroachment (Chatterjee, 2004).

Additionally, India's continuous fights for democracy show a complex reality that often contradicts the simplistic Western perspective that adherence to Western ideals requires democratic advancement. From the moment it gained independence in 1947, India was confronted with the twin problems of managing domestic democratic aspirations and fending off the frequent hypocrisy of Western democratic rhetoric that is less rooted in a genuine belief in democratic aspirations and more in self-interest. As such, there is an urgent need to reassess the frameworks through which we evaluate democratic movements in South Asia and to understand the importance of fostering

community-oriented societies that transcend the limitations imposed by Western market ideologies (Sen, 2009).

3. Political Parties and Democratic Governance

Democratic governance, as well as democracy, depends on executive leadership, political parties, and party systems. The type and structure of political regimes play a crucial role in the quality of democracy in a country. Two-party or multi-level political systems are the predominant norm in South Asian countries. Most political parties in South Asia showcase a strong hierarchical structure, often related to an individual prominent leader or intimately tied to a charismatic individual. A diverse range of parties marks India's political landscape, each founded on varying ideologies; however, internal democracy remains largely absent within these parties (Bhatia, 2017, pp. 45-58).

Political parties in South Asia often secure electoral power by effectively representing and aggregating diverse interests, articulating public concerns, and incorporating these interests into the legislative framework. These parties' organizational principles, functions, and ideological orientations vary significantly. Additionally, their internal functioning varies, influenced by centralized or decentralized deliberation and policy-making mechanisms.

Multifaceted challenges that afflict South Asian political parties include the lack of internal democracy, intra-party dissent, fragmentation, ideological discord, power struggles, personality cults, and clientelism. Despite these inherent weaknesses, political parties are essential in enhancing political participation and representation, significantly affecting electoral systems and governance processes. Furthermore, a country's party system has been recognized as a critical determinant of political stability (Hussain, 2021, pp. 12-30).

Political parties wield impressive power over the formation of governments, leveraging their relationships with different societal actors to leave their mark on the social and political agenda. By promoting public participation, legitimacy, and stable governance, political parties could nurture a democratic culture that respects constitutional values and the rule of law. The Maldives and Bangladesh reveal the important ways these political parties steer the direction of democracy in their respective contexts (Shah, 2020, pp. 35-52). Political parties' potential is too great to create other versions through informal power networks outside parties. Furthermore, political parties must align with democratic ideals to effectively fulfill their designated functions.

4. Electoral Systems and Voting Patterns in South Asian Countries

In a democratic polity, the conduct of elections and the process by which political representatives are elected significantly influence the overall democratic landscape of a country. South Asian nations exhibit hybrid models of representative democracy characterized by multi-party systems governed by traditional first-past-the-post systems or proportional representation systems. The preference for the first-past-the-post electoral system by several South Asian governments for parliamentary elections is often justified by the belief that it contributes to strengthening national institutions through establishing stable single-party governments. This electoral framework enables clarity and decisiveness in governance, producing a more efficient administrative structure. However, students, educators, and Wikipedia editors still argue about how these systems affect fairness and inclusiveness in elections (Ahmed, 2022, pp. 245-264).

Their thoughtful considerations on electoral systems exist within the domain of comparative politics, ranging from their genesis to their merits and demerits. Moreover, the analysis sheds light on how different elements of electoral systems can affect partisanship, political representation, and political institution functioning. At the same time, many studies have sought to understand how people vote, especially what motivates people to vote and what keeps them from voting; in failing to advance the practice of democracy significantly, the author's marshal data against the established norms of electoral studies that isolate individual motives. Such analyses are particularly pertinent when examining the voting patterns of the South Asian electorate, as they contribute significantly to the broader scholarly discourse by elucidating the dynamics of electoral and political behavior, as well as the recurring patterns observed in electoral participation across South Asian countries (Maheshwari, 2015, pp. 47-64).

In this context, it is essential to address the integrity of elections, the implications of freely and fairly elected governments, and the pathways through which such systems can be achieved. Such discourses usually demand a scrupulous analysis of electoral systems, outlining distinguishing qualities of qualitative vs. quantitative approaches and supplying diverse viewpoints. Furthermore, case studies that showcase successful implementations of free and fair electoral processes can also be referenced, shedding light on best practices and lessons learned (Rao, 2018, pp. 115-130).

5. Ethnicity, Religion, and Democracy in South Asia

Ethnic, religious, and other identity categories shape political behavior and affect political institutions and processes. The South Asian landscape is marked not just by its human diversity (regarding ethnicities, races, religions, and languages). This notable diversity is evident in the institutional frameworks established by South Asian nation-states, particularly concerning religious and linguistic pluralism. Though South Asia is not the only locale where identity-driven politics have taken root with ethnicity and religion at the core, it has historically spawned many ethnic-based armed conflicts and violent separatist struggles in its diverse multiethnic societies. As a result, the relationship between democracy and ethnic and/or religious violence has attracted scholarly interest that instead speaks to the intricacies of the role of ethnicity and religion in a democratic context (Jaffrelot, 2003).

In multireligious cultures, the intersection of religion and politics readily emerges, as the pillars of religious authority often inflect with the concomitant influences of territorial, economic, and political power, which contributes to a spike in incidents of mob lynching and communal violence against various sects. The southern part of Asia has long been a center for important religions like Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, and many different religious communities have developed. The high voter turnout rates in migrant-sending nations suggest transnational ties between origin and destination countries and connect home country populations with their diaspora. Significant internal migration in South Asia is predominantly driven by economic opportunity, mainly from rural to urban areas across caste, class, and gender. Nevertheless, migration patterns may also be determined by ethnicity or cultural identity. Despite the movement towards better opportunities, migrant workers often encounter ethnocentrism in labor markets, characterized by lower wages and poor working conditions, regardless of skill level (Bhatia & Philip, 2020, pp. 45-62).

In Nepal, Nepali-speaking citizens often experience marginalization and are exploited by political entities, contributing to the nation's stagnation. While Sri Lanka has moved forward on the reconciliation front regarding federalism, the resurgence of nationalism threatens to derail that progress. In the end, a grim prognosis awaits for democratic administration unless the fractured entities of today discover the social importance of identity. A meticulous assessment of case studies across various South Asian states exposes the basic conceptual flaws underpinning democracy and fundamental flaws in our understanding of democratization (Rana, 2023, pp. 95-112).

6. Gender and Democracy in South Asia

Scholarly interest in the relationship between gender and democracy, particularly regarding women's access to public office at the federal level, has surged globally. It is widely recognized that South Asia exhibits weak institutional characteristics that perpetuate gender bias, manifesting at individual, familial, and societal levels. Many women face exclusion from adult education and political socialization, often enduring violence and intimidation while participating in political processes. Cultural norms significantly reinforce gender discrimination, with both feminist and non-feminist scholars agreeing that these norms present substantial barriers to women's participation in democratic institutions and decision-making (Mandal & Choudhury, 2021, pp. 56-74).

Recently, significant theoretical and policy literature has attempted to link gender dynamics to the functioning of democratic governance, underscoring that gender equality and women's empowerment in decision-making roles are essential not only morally but also in alignment with normative democratic values. South Asian women have engaged in successive feminist movements and autonomy initiatives, responding positively and actively to these challenges. Contemporary studies document profound women's movements across South Asian countries aimed at substantive empowerment, showcasing diverse women's narratives, including those from various classes and castes, who seek to establish a new ideological framework of nationhood based on democracy, equality, and gender harmony (Patel & Sinha, 2021, pp. 491-509).

In their quest to contest systemic exclusion, women have exhibited pluralism and engaged in vigorous struggles for representation across all spheres of life, achieving notable success. The emergence of a feminist form of citizenship centered on women's distinct identity, autonomy, and self-reliance has been significantly influenced by women leaders and activists. Such leaders utilize their unique position to prime policies that serve the interests of women voters. Among the most impactful measures has been the establishment of independent national commissions for women across South Asia from the late 1990s onward (Bhatia, 2022, pp. 45-60).

Citizen empowerment, particularly through decentralizing authority and resources, is a cornerstone of effective governance. Integrating committed local governance with broader political structures is expected to foster a political environment conducive to empowerment and democratic accountability. Consequently, constructing gender-inclusive political frameworks and analytical perspectives is essential for reframing

governance, which is necessary for genuine citizen participation and effective accountability. Legislation to increase women's representation in decision-making is crucial for advancing political gender equality, which is vital in sustaining democracy and ensuring that women's diverse experiences shaped by caste, class, and ethnicity are acknowledged. Simply giving women space does not cut it; we need a deeper understanding of the complexities of gender construction (Sharma, 2023, pp. 150-166).

7. Youth Participation and Democratic Engagement

Discussions regarding participation must encompass the perspectives and unique contributions of youth; otherwise, they risk alienating the largest group of potential participants who possess a distinctive critical voice and can offer viable solutions to pressing global challenges. Without sufficient citizens actively fostering democratic values, attitudes, and behaviors within their communities, the prospect of reaping a democratic dividend remains elusive. While alternative modes of engagement may yield short-term benefits, these are not sustainable in nurturing robust, vibrant, and accountable democracies. Moreover, the seemingly apathetic youth depicted in various global studies do not accurately characterize the majority; instead, they challenge us to rethink how democracy is envisioned, enacted, and perceived in South Asia, particularly concerning the youth demographic. Insights from a nationally representative survey indicated that 84% of young individuals express trust in their community members, 66% are inclined to participate in public action against corruption, and 76% aspire to engage in job-related teamwork (Rai, 2023, pp. 87-102).

There has been a trend of global observation on how to address the question of weak interest among the youth in political engagement, and the years 2011 onwards were observed as significant years in analyzing the role of youth during and post-social movements against the government. The youth in Middle Eastern countries were termed the 'harbingers of change,' fueled by their dissatisfaction with their countries' governance structures and policies. In making this declaration, the world finally began to take youth and their grievances seriously. The scholarship began to take a more significant interest in interrogating the nature of young people's aspirations and their critical role as active change-makers. However, the examination of youth experience and activism in development was not paralleled in South Asia. In addition to having physical access to the ballot, South Asian citizens are less than 45 years old in a region where a significant proportion of the population falls within this age bracket. The mentioned age bracket population is expected to grow in the coming decades.

8. Economic Development and Democracy in South Asia

The development of capitalism in South Asia in the last century is integrally connected with the extension of liberal democratic rule. Economic development, or growth itself, is seen as a function of political stability. Economic growth again correlates to the leading metaphor of democracy and democratic governance. While democracy is based on ideas of free individual choice, this individual accumulates wealth by shedding the fetters of inefficient, corrupt, and unrepresentative regimes.

The challenges to the growth model are of concern in the context of our analysis of democracy. The expansion of capital, coupled with a political impetus towards enhancing liberal norms and free-market techniques, will not necessarily result in an equitable distribution of wealth or a rise in living standards for all citizens. The two approaches, the elite upgrading perspectives, and the developmental analysts differ in their focus, with the former concerned mostly with technological methodologies and the latter with the developmental impacts of economic and non-economic policy.

The elite upgrading perspective assumes that one dominant political characteristic prevails with the opening up of markets, or, in other words, the economic takes precedence over the political. States have political histories, however, which shape how they pursue economic policies. Privileged access to dominant policy-making circles in South Asian countries has tended to bring to the fore economic policy at the expense of social forecasts. Institutional development and the appearance of suitable economic legal principles, such as those protecting contracts and property, greatly condition the policies' outcomes.

Economic influential groups also derive political support from social groups because of how political-economic policies unfold. Once a policy change is implemented, then the developmental impact of economic growth will be varied and shaped by the state's politics. The papers in this volume offer a range of case studies on the effects of specific economic actions on democratic institutions. Focusing primarily on the effects of economic reform, the papers examine whether policy changes have loosened authoritarian systems and, if so, in what way and under what conditions. In particular, they conceptualize economic actions as policies, not just market forces, from which a range of non-economic impacts can be theorized.

International financial sponsors play a vital role in mediating the shifts in economic policy and, thereby, the changes in democratic governance. Not only does the delivery of reform influence the quality of democratic governance, but the impact of a reformed policy also influences how supranational finance institutions are in the

routine functioning of government; allegations of their interfering in domestic politics by extending regimes that are likely to have difficulty meeting their external financial requirements. Democratic processes are thereby rendered of little functional value. It is ultimately the case that sustainable economic development, as enshrined in democratic practices, is not just a product of economic change but depends upon it.

9. Foreign Policy Implications of Democratic Governance in South Asia

The foreign policy agenda of the South Asian countries is primarily affected by domestic politics and, more importantly, by the nature of governance. Different types of governance solidify different types of foreign policy priorities and decisions. For example, an autocratically governed country decides its foreign policy based on its total control over its power—such a country usually follows pragmatic foreign policy decisions. By contrast, multiclass-oriented diplomacy often overshadows a regime representative of and supported by different classes. In this chapter, we argue that the democratic nature of a country's government cradles its foreign policy decisions.

The perspective is presented against real politics, where ideologies are castigated and interests appreciated. Our point is that sovereignty and democracy are not the exclusive dominions of *realpolitik*. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first part shows that the foreign policy of South Asian countries largely depends on the types of governance. The second part shows an empirical analysis of how autonomy-seeking characters in foreign policy decision-making are influenced by the types of government. It discusses three case studies about democratic and non-democratic countries in South Asia. These are examined through the eyes of three levels of analysis: systemic, state, and individual levels.

The types of societies significantly influence the decisions of states regarding foreign policy. Some argue that democratic governance would significantly change global politics. On the other hand, international relations theories question the efficacy of democracies in regional alliances. Others argue that allies are founded on common interests, not shared values. The findings suggest that state behavior is cast in the molds of individual ideational leanings about autonomy-seeking characters and that democratic governance imposes some constraints on national policymaking. Regionalism and foreign policy decision-making in South Asian states must be analyzed from the perspectives of governmental types.

The following section discusses the issue of how different types of governance craft their foreign policies in global politics. Political economy approaches are irrelevant in

such explorations. The insights generated from the two approaches to regional/grouping behavior and foreign policy decision-making tend to challenge and illuminate the vast literature that leans toward realism. It offers professional insight to domestic and international social scientists keen to analyze regional and state behavior considering both regimes and individual ideational behavior. This chapter on governance only uses a formal political economy approach. These additions include the importance of political liberalization on a country's entry into economic blocs, persistent security build-ups, the role of norms in diplomatic relations, state character and regional policies, and discussions on diplomatic commitments on human rights. Above all, explorations on the issue are vastly brushed up.

10. Case Studies: Country-specific Analysis of Democratic Progress

Due to the wide variation among South Asian countries, it is clear that there has been no uniform pattern of movement toward or away from democracy. To understand the diversity of political development in South Asia, this volume offers a series of case studies that provide a country-specific analysis of democratic progress, focusing on the last decade. We discuss the recent context and trajectory of democracy in Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. While each case study extensively treats many of these factors, a few common and particularly salient threads emerge.

The historical trajectory of Nepal plays a crucial role in shaping its political identity. Moreover, the networks and forms of clientelism that have emerged during these formative periods are intricately linked to broader social hierarchies that dictate the dynamics of power and resource allocation (Bhadra, 2014). A pertinent research hypothesis emerges from this discussion: Unlike Western democratization experiences, South Asia's trajectory toward democracy has not been primarily characterized by economic development, a burgeoning middle class, or a decline in patronage-based political structures. Additionally, the evolution of linguistic and ethno-nationalism has profoundly influenced state-society relations, leading to tensions that can either foster conflict or promote integration, thereby impacting the long-term development of democracy in the region. Furthermore, the involvement of major external powers has shaped the political trajectories of individual South Asian countries and the implications of regional geopolitics on domestic political frameworks (Khan, 2017).

11. Future Prospects for Democracy in South Asian Countries

Frequent elections, the dissemination of information, and an increasingly educated society suggest a promising future for democratic governance in South Asia. Many believe in democratic norms and corresponding attitudes. Regional dynamics among South Asian states, particularly driven by India, further promote governance models that diverge from authoritarian rule. Nations such as Bhutan, India, and Nepal have established stable democracies. Meanwhile, Pakistan and Bangladesh have experienced progress in their democratic governance systems, albeit intermittently, in recent decades. Conversely, countries like the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Seychelles have long faced democratic banking crises, and similar or even worse challenges are evident in authoritarian regimes such as China and Thailand (Ghimire, 2023).

The emergence of modern technologies, particularly the Internet and social media, provides a significant avenue for mobilization toward establishing a robust democratic framework. This development compels public institutions to enhance their administrative practices. Despite the rising wave of authoritarianism observed in several South Asian nations, democratic engagement remains unimpeded. Civil society, notably through women's movements and youth initiatives, actively challenges unconstitutional actions while advocating for democratic principles (Ranjan, 2021).

At times, the violent protests advocating for democracy highlight the populace's voice. Among economists, a consensus exists that democracy fosters more stable economic development than autocratic regimes. While democracy does not directly equate to alleviating poverty, sustained economic growth diminishes the likelihood of autocratic governance. In a tumultuous present, intertwined with the shadows of historical struggles intensified by global challenges, ongoing rapid socio-cultural, socio-political, and socio-economic transformations are evident. The emergence of new social, cultural, and power elites, along with shifting ideologies and hegemonic aspirations, increasingly influences the political pathways pursued by nations and their societies (Parajuli, 2019).

12. Conclusion

Comparative political and sociological studies of democracy in Asia, particularly South Asia, have rarely been common, and mainstream Western scholarship tends to outshine the Asian alternative. This study attempts to fill this gap by examining the democratization process in some South Asian states.

South Asian democracies emerge from a tangled web of colonialism, political culture, economic incentives, social structures, and elite policy decisions. These countries' rich history contributed to their becoming democracies because of their monarchies and colonial pasts. The paper examines democracy's multifaceted character, revealing its relevance to theoretical models beyond liberal democracy, including participatory or deliberative democracy.

Although South Asian nations have developed democratic structures over time, they face many threats on this path, including a lack of institutions, corrupted systems, unstable politics, social disparities, and ascendant authoritarianism.

The paper concludes on an optimistic note, pointing out civil society's resilience, the increasing significance of women's movements and youth participation, and the possibilities of regional cooperation to promote democracy in the region.

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