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Democratic Backsliding in South Asia: A Comparative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines a case of democratic backsliding in South Asia beyond Western-centric models. The focus is on assessing how past legacies, political culture and economic circumstances influence democracy in this part of the world. The paper takes a qualitative, comparative perspective and draws. Key findings indicate that the constitutionalisation and anchoring of democracy in constitutions and electoral systems are compromised by low institutional capacity, few social precursors to democracy, and increased authoritarianism. The resilience of civil society, the activism of women, and the presidency of young people are powerful forces working against it: they provide ample room to resist authoritarianism and generate space for local action. The paper highlights the contested and resurgent features of democracy and offers important lessons for scholars and policy makers.

Keywords: Civil society, democracy, electoral systems, political institutions, South Asia.

Introduction

The global proliferation of authoritarianism has turned democratic erosion into a primary site of contestation within comparative politics. It operationalises democratic backsliding as a subversive or decay process that reflects an unwillingness to comply with democratic principles and may result in increased authoritarianism and/or institutional instability (Angiolillo et al., 2024:1597–1621). It is a global truth, but it takes particular urgency and complication in South Asia, which is the home to some drastically different polities — India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and, more tragically, Afghanistan, where democracy has now totally melted down. While the latter are indeed highly important, they have been far too long ignored as a problem within mainstream Western-centric theories of democratisation (He, 2022, pp. 111–139). The path of democracy in this part of the globe is determined by its historical legacy, unique political traditions, and deep social polarisation, which demand a complex non-Western theoretical framework.

This paper seeks to offer a nuanced account of backsliding in South Asian democracies. Even if they have formal constitutional institutions and electoral systems, the underlying effectiveness of those is constantly subverted by profound institutional inadequacy, fixed social divisions and a rise in illiberal political tendencies. It consider how particular democratic institutions, political actors and electoral dynamics exacerbate or mitigate these erosive forces through in-depth comparative analysis. The research also seeks to shed light on the contested nature of democracy in the region and to identify sources of democratic resilience, such as protest dynamism among civil society actors, women's activism, and youth mobilisation, all important narratives and vibrant grassroots movements that constitute exceptional counterpoints to the illiberal trend. The findings produce important policy-relevant conclusions for those interested in fostering democratic governance in this strategically vital region.

Background of the Study

The comparative study of democracy in South Asia has long been neglected in political and sociological research, which has predominantly emphasized Western models (He, 2022, pp. 111–139). The following paper primarily seek to address this theoretic hiatus by proposing a holistic, multi-leveled examination beyond one single [liberal-democratic] frame. It argues

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about the impacts of history, political culture and social structure. It makes the point that although constitutional infrastructure is necessary, it “structures politics”; it is frequently frustrated by the malignant forces of illiberalism, weak institutions and unequal society. The research is qualitative, with secondary information sources to interpret a thematic and historical background. It examines the evolution of democratic institutions and electoral rules, non-state actors (such as social movements and media), political parties, party strategies, and the party system. It explains the causes behind presidentialism, instability, and polarising elections.

Statement of the Problem

The principal concern is democratic backsliding in South Asia, which threatens political stability and runs counter to established canons of democratisation and consolidation (Angiolillo et al., 2024, pp. 1597–1621; He, 2022, pp. 111–139). Although there remain ceremonial constitutional and electoral arrangements, their efficiency is no longer sufficient in the face of systemic institutional debility, deepening social inequality and illiberal political tendencies.

This is an important one to study, for the dominant Western-centred frameworks are not entirely capable of explaining the idiosyncrasies of South African power relations and history legacy and socio-economic complexities (He, 2022, pp. 111–139). In the absence of such nuanced, multidimensional reflections and indigenous counter-forces, including civil society, youth mobilisation and resistance this will continue to remain an enigma as far as the substance and nature of contested South Asian democracy is concerned.

Without this study, policymakers and scholars will keep misdiagnosing the regional rot, often with deadly consequences for their interventions; worst-case scenario, facing a full-on democratic meltdown as it has tragically witnessed in Afghanistan. It needs to understand how democratic erosion and resilience work to maintain democracy in this important strategic area.

Objectives of the Study

The main points addressed in this paper are:

1. Examine South Asian democratic development without Western-centric paradigms.
2. Analyse the impact of history, political culture, and social class on regional democracies.
3. Assess the impact of important individuals and institutions on the values underpinning democratic systems.

Literature Review

This paper draws attention to the urgent problem of democratic backsliding in South Asia which consists on the disregard of democratic principles and weakening of institutions, (Angiolillo et al., 2024, pp. 1597–1621). The hope is to provide a nuanced, multifaceted explanation of underdevelopment that goes beyond the Western canon and even shows how historic and structural ills stand in the way of formal institutions.

This analysis examines the decline in democratic quality (a shift toward authoritarianism). An orthodox lens of Institutional Theory would emphasise the constitutional structures quite vigorously, but, on the other hand, that is denied by what constitutes the empirical lithosphere: ‘cores’ have their functionaries perennially prevented from functioning by systemic pathologies conceptualised as both anti-liberalism and social inequality (Cheema, 2021; He, 2022). It addresses what we perceive as the deterioration of this, in need of a critical concept, that of Elite Theory and reminds us that political parties are not dominated by democracy; they tend to centralise power in leaders and also exhibit intolerance for political contestation, which

does not serve elite groups (Bizzarro et al., 2018; Wolkenstein, 2015). The role of corruption and political instability in disintegrating the system is enormous. Structural fragility can also lead to corruption, partisanship and clientelism, limiting the diffusion of a democratic culture. Its absence, particularly due to the lack of intraparty democracy and fragmentation, is a source of political instability that negatively correlates with good governance and economic development (Campos et al., 2020).

These include geopolitical competition and great-power rivalry across vast distances. There is evidence from the region that other agendas in foreign policy decision-making and democratic institutional outcomes may be driven by external domination (Mishra, 1980). However, occasionally it can depart from the rigours of realpolitik calculation (Akhter, 2022, pp. 1–9). The dominant Western perspective has effectively marginalised self-rule and autonomy, suggesting that indigenous frameworks may be a prerequisite for discussing them (Akhter, 2012, pp. 1–9). What is clear, however, is that the formal institutional shape of democracy in South Asia has consistently been unable to transcend these structural issues – internal and external.

Methodology

This paper uses qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) to investigate these complicated dynamics of democratic erosion and its countervailing forces in the South Asian Region. The research design is non-experimental and based on analysis of only secondary sources- such as existing academic literature, policy reports, scholarly books, and regional/international governance bodies' reports. This tactic is required to disrupt Westerners' normativity and to account for the region's specificities as a historical, cultural, and political subject. The substance of the method is a macro-level comparison along two integrated axes: erosion in formal institutional efficacy (for example, electoral systems, constitutional checks) versus counterforces from native forms of resilience (civil society, women's activism). However, this qualitative framework is particularly well-suited for investigating in depth how institutionalized weakness and illiberalism interact with entrenched forms of social division. The aggregation of CCIs is to be interpreted in comparative political research as a way to spot common trends and differences across countries that can enable more complex explanations for democratic decline—not least, for possible democratic futures.

DISCUSSIONS

DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS IN SOUTH ASIAN COUNTRIES

The executive, parliament, and judiciary are the three main branches that play pivotal roles in sustaining democracy in a democratic state. There are also other actors essential to the proper functioning of these core institutions, including electoral and judicial commissions and the media. There is no doubt these countries, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives are all young democracies on their journey to better democratic governance (Cheema, 2021, pp. 554-562).

A closer look at their respective political model ensures that Pakistan and Bangladesh opted for unicameral legislature, whereas India, Maldives and Sri Lanka choosed bicameral. Even if these countries hold general elections, there is a range of democratic systems within each. It is a parliamentary democracy in India and the Maldives, and a presidential democracy in the rest. There are also many political parties within each country and a variety of electoral systems for its lower houses.

More strenuous actions and institutions can encourage good governance by functional democratic organisations. Elsewhere in South Asia, institutions have both positive and negative features. Such establishments suffer from systemic deficiencies that foster corruption,

partisanship, and the weakness of political parties. At the macro level and by comparing South Asian countries, this study underscores the role of institutions in promoting democratic governance.

India has by far the most effective political institutions in South Asia. While some in the Maldives and Sri Lanka have been undermined, their overall strength is unmistakable. Simultaneously, like Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, Pakistan's institutions have failed to mature efficiently and thoroughly. The overall picture is one of high-institutional injustice, with some 40 out of 100 institutional weaknesses found in Pakistan. Further, the health problems that people suffer in Pakistan are over twice as many as those reported in Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH ASIA

Democracy in the South Asian region is under threat from authoritarian dynasts, patrimonial political systems and increased threats to security. Disparities in socio-economic status and the marginalisation of certain people perpetuate unevenness. However, there are strong grassroots winds, fueled by public anger at corruption. Rising anti-corruption sentiment might lead to the normalisation of democratic norms. In addition, with respect to political participation, the growing activism of female population indicates a “silver lining” in the region’s commitment to democratic values (Bekenova, 2022, pp. 71-86).

Moreover, the arrival of external assistance in these countries is expected to significantly impact regional growth. Donors emphasise principles of good governance, inclusion, equity, and non-discrimination in their democracy-building efforts. Furthermore, South Asian countries are engaging with regional organisations, which may facilitate the transmission of democratic norms and human rights (Shah, 2020, pp. 35-57).

There is a potential silver lining in the interaction of political reform and economic development. Resolutions to a range of pressing problems - from rejuvenating their economies and tackling political and economic corruption, nepotism and minority alienation - could generate hope. Although case studies post-independence of some nations show mixed results, they do evidence the existence of liberal institutions conforming to the Western liberal-democratic model.

ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN PROMOTING DEMOCRATIC VALUES

Social movements and NGOs significantly shape policy and public opinion in South Asia, championing social justice, transparency, human rights, and environmental concerns. As intermediaries between the state and citizens, Civil Society amplifies the voices of the unheard and fosters grassroots democracy. In India, civil society mobilisation has played a vital role in promoting accountability, social development, participation, and the rule of law. For one, they have made states' responses and non-responses known to both local and global publics. Second, civil society has influenced issue-based policies and state action. Third, they demand accountability from specific state agents for decision-making or actions (Akin & Adeola, 2018).

The statements by these officials have become important new aspects in political dynamics, creating precedents and signals for other state and non-state actors. The state of officials' relations with civil society is conflictual, and public opinion sometimes sides with the state. Disputes continue over the extent of progress, as those with a stake in democratisation do not succeed, leading to failed attempts and varying levels across international measures of democracy. Despite previous neglect in the literature, new research brings civil society players

to the forefront of democratisation. However, not all take advantage of new chances to increase transparency and streamline political, bureaucratic, and social life (Angiolillo et al., 2024, pp. 1597-1621).

There is no tolerance for political contestation that is not of the service to elite interests in South Asia. While articulated as “solidaristic”, this is a nuanced view, with Marxist views arguing that civil society’s incorporation into state elites will be self-defeating, and others misleadingly staking out stakeholder individualism. South Asia is in the midst of a significant transformation with growing global linkages. Such key democratic progressions can make people’s first loyalty (to tribal-like groups or social classes) allow them to support strong movements for social and political change, as leaders of such movements argue that their interests extend far beyond the mere route and scope of a leader. This movement represents a dialectic between tradition and progressivism, with different elements coalescing around more general societal change agendas (Christens & Speer, 2015, pp. 193-222).

MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH ASIA

The media is embedded in a highly politically polarised environment, where competing political actors vie to shape the media’s discursive role. Media teams additionally engage in influencing lobbying government entities and other elite groups. This paper focuses on the people of India, with particular emphasis on Pakistan, and provides a more limited focus on Bangladesh. Additionally, we provide a brief analysis of recent events in Sri Lanka. Importantly, an inclination among government leaders and parties in South Asia to meddle with the independent operation of the news media and journalism is also evident in 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 liberalisation experienced in parts of Latin America and South Korea (Gamage, 2024, pp. 1941–1949).

The pervasive notion that democracy in South Asia is merely a variant of Western representative democracy hinders 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 overlooks the fact that South Asian countries, particularly India, are under no obligation to adopt Western standards or paradigms, whether through wholesale imposition or gradual encroachment (Akhter, 2022, pp. 1-9).

Moreover, India’s present fight for democracy demonstrates a paradoxical situation in which what is preached often does not match what is practised: the simple Western outlook that obeisance to Western standards would result in democratic implementation. Since its independence in 1947, India’s twin problems have been how to address its domestic democratic aspirations and how to repel (successfully) Western Democratic Hypocrisy, which rests less on belief in democratic aspiration and more cynically on self-interest. It is time therefore that the framework through which democratic movements in South Asia are assessed be re-evaluated, and that we begin to appreciate for example, the need for community-oriented societies irrespective of western market ideologies (Korf et al., 2024, pp. 960–1007).

POLITICAL PARTIES AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

Effective presidential leadership and strong political parties and party systems are essential for democracy. The degree and nature of political regimes play an important role in determining the quality of democracy in a nation. Most South Asian countries have a two-party/ multi-party political system. The hierarchical nature of most political parties in South Asia, usually built

around one strong leader or based on a charismatic personality is obvious. India has a polyphonic political system with a wide range of parties with distinct ideological salients, but there is hardly any internal-party democracy within these parties.

Political parties in South Asia win elections by expressing/ aggregating interests, representing the public, and working on its behalf through law-making. These parties vary widely in terms of their organisation, roles, and ideological positions. In addition, their internal constitution varies in centralised versus decentralised forms of deliberation and advisory systems (Wolkenstein, 2015, pp. 297–320).

Political parties in South Asia are confronted with a plethora of multi-dimensional challenges, including the lack of intra-party democracy, intra-party factionalism, factional fragmentation, ideological schizophrenia, power struggles, personality-centred politics, and patronage-based politics. Notwithstanding these problems, political parties play a crucial role in the expansion of political participation and representation and also have profound effects on electoral systems and governance. Moreover, a nation's party system has been regarded as a crucial factor influencing political stability (Bizzarro et al., 2018, pp. 275-320).

Political parties play a significant role in shaping government, leveraging their connections across diverse sectors to set social and political priorities. They said that political parties have the potential to create, nurture the democratic culture that upholds constitutional values and rule of law. The Maldives and Bangladesh demonstrate how these political parties shape the prospects for democracy in those countries (Cui & Li, 2025, p. 2010). The potential of political parties are too great to compensate with informal powers networks that work anywhere but through the party system. Value democracy Moreover, political parties have to be in tune with the principles of democracy to perform their prescribed roles effectively.

ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AND VOTING PATTERNS

The conduct of elections and the process of candidate selection within democratic polities also shape the terrain of democracy. Many South Asian countries use a hybrid electoral system combining mixed-member proportional representation and first-past-the-post. The relative superiority of first-past-the-post in parliamentary elections is often claimed because it yields stronger national institutions and single-party administrations, and hence more decisive governance and effective management. However, the effect of it on electoral fairness and participation has been contested among scholars and policymakers (Johnson, 2023, pp. 1135-1159).

Academic studies of electoral systems consider their Some studies also examine voter motivations and deviate from the conventional practice by using more comprehensive data to gain insights into the vote in South Asia, thereby adding to scholarly debates on electoral and political behaviour. In such perspective, the integrity of elections shall be supplemented with free and fair elected government and correct ways to have such systems placed. These kinds of discourses nearly always include carefully thought-through electoral-system analysis, the distinct features of qualitative versus quantitative approaches, and different perspectives. Examples of good practice and lessons learned. Examples of successes in free and fair elections may also be presented through case studies that examine how they were practised (Elkli & Svensson, 1997, pp. 32-46).

ETHNICITY, RELIGION, AND DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH ASIA

Political behaviour and institutions in South Asia, a region characterized by deep human diversity, are also influenced by ethnic, religious and other identity-based categories. Religion and Multireligious societies' Religion and politics are easily mingled, as the pillars of religious authority intersect with the concomitant influences of territorial, economic, and political

power—the very areas in which organised culture starts to transcend stable tribal segments—with animosity spreading towards increased incidents of mob lynching and communal violence against various religious groups. There has been a long history of development of significant religions in South Asia, namely Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, and hence a range of religious traditions (Vasudeva, 2024, pp. 111–138).

The high voter turnout rates in migrant-sending nations suggest transnational ties between origin and destination countries, connecting home-country populations with their diasporas. Significant internal migration in South Asia is predominantly driven by economic opportunities, primarily from rural to urban areas, and is not confined to caste, class, or gender.

However, the migration style could also be a function of ethnic affiliation or cultural identity. However, the continuing path of seeking improved opportunities places migrant workers in receiving labour markets, marked by xenophobia, resulting in low remuneration and harsh working conditions at all skill levels (Elo et al., 2020).

Nepal As the Nepali nation sinks deeper, political actors continue to marginalise and use since-times-in-memorial fellow citizens of Nepali origin. Sri Lanka has made progress on the reconciliation side of federalism, but a resurgence of nationalism could undermine it. Ultimately, the fate of democratic government is pretty bleak unless the fragmented institutions of today open their doors to acknowledge identities as socially significant collectively. Detailed investigation of case studies from several different South Asian countries highlight the underlying theoretical shortcomings of democracy and the essential problems in our understanding of democratisation (Cheema, 2021, pp. 554–562).

GENDER AND DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH ASIA

Academic interest in the link between VAW and democracy, particularly in women's opportunities for public office at the federal level, has emerged worldwide. It is a well-known fact that South Asian countries are characterized by strong institutional factors and norms which reinforce gender inequalities both at private (individual, household) and public spheres. Many women are marginalised from second-chance education and political socialisation processes, frequently experiencing violence and harassment in the context of engaging in political activity. Cultural norms strongly perpetuate gender discrimination, and both feminists and non-feminists acknowledge gender discrimination as a significant impediment to the participation of women in democratic institutions and decision-making (Kiplimo & Amunga, 2021, pp.46-54).

A growing body of theoretical and policy literature has sought to connect gender dynamics with the democratic governance process, emphasising that women's ability to be part of decision making is important both as an end in itself and in the context of normative democratic values. South Asian women have participated in waves of feminist movements, and self-governance programs as positive and active responses to these challenges. Recent literature documents intensive women's mobilisations in which women from different classes and castes strive to write a fresh ideological script for nation-building, driven by democracy, egalitarianism and gender amity (Begum, 2022, pp. 75–84).

Women in their fight against systemic marginalisation have shown pluralism and waged relentless struggles for representation at all levels of life, with impressive results. The rise of a gendered form of citizen identity rooted in the particularity, autonomy, and independence of women has been shaped by female leaders and agitators. Leaders like these use their extraordinary platform to promote policies that benefit women when it comes to voting. One of the most effective initiatives has been to set up autonomous national women's commissions

in South Asia respectively since 1990s (Mondal & Ghosh, 2021, pp. 44-51).

Enabling citizen empowerment, in particular by devolving power and resources, is a key element of good governance. It is believed that the reconciliation of dedicated local governance with wider political institutions will create a politically enabling atmosphere for both empowerment and democratic accountability. It is thus important to build inclusive gender political frameworks and analytical approaches that refocus governance to enable citizens to participate meaningfully in the process and hold their governments accountable. Laws to raise the representation of women in decision-making are important to enhance political gender equality, necessary for sustaining democracy, and to recognise that the diverse experiences of women do play out according to caste, class, or ethnicity. Physical space for women is not, by itself, enough; we need to understand the nuances of gender brokering.

YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

The perspective should inform debates about the involvement of young people; otherwise, you could end up excluding the single largest group who have (arguably) an important voice and potential solutions that can work. Without active citizens who stoked democratic fires, there is little chance of receiving a dividend on the democracy investment. If that develops, even after the emergence of new means during the current era (which might provide short-term gains), they are not as conducive to the development of strong democracies. Moreover, so apparently disinterested a younger generation causes us to rethink our ideas of how democracy is imagined, acted and experienced in the context of South Asia, but more specifically through this demographic. An 85 per cent majority of young people have confidence in their local area, two-thirds are likely to act publicly against corruption, and three-quarters see themselves working as part of a team (Jackson & Dore, 2020, pp. 617-649).

Following the 2011 Arab Spring and other social movements, the willingness of young people in the Middle East to be agents of change, driven by dissatisfaction with leadership, was recognised. This drew attention to young people's aspirations and activism worldwide. As academia began to pay more attention to youth as 'changemakers', this trend did not reflect in South Asia. South Asians under the age of 45, an expanding demographic, may have physical access to the ballot, but there has yet to be an analysis of their political participation.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH ASIA

The history of South Asian capitalism in the past century is inevitably entwined with the widespread embrace of liberal democratic regimes. This correlation promotes economic reform linked to political stability. Democracy and economic growth are also correlated. Whereas democracy is built upon the autonomy of individual actions, economic development involves removing corrupt and ineffective governments (Sharma, 2009, pp. 867-881). Despite this, there are challenges to this growth model because the proliferation of capital and liberal norms does not automatically produce equitable wealth distribution or an improved standard of living for everyone, revealing different worldviews between elite upgrading (emphasising technical means) and political economists (stressing policy outcomes).

The elite-upgrading approach argues that market opening results in economic domination over political elements. However, states' historical context influences economic policies, which is likely to give precedence to economic over social predictions because of insiders' status in shaping them. Economically powerful classes win political support from social groups through economic policies, and inequality perversely affects growth, strengthening it. The effects of economic actions on democratic institutions, specifically examining how policy changes have

influenced authoritarian systems and conceptualising economic actions as policies with broader non-economic impacts (Campos et al., 2020, pp. 883-910).

International financial sponsors have a significant influence on shifts in economic policy and changes in democratic governance. The delivery and impact of reforms affect the quality of democratic governance and the routine functioning of government, with allegations of interference in domestic politics by extending regimes struggling to meet financial requirements, thus diminishing the value of democratic processes. Ultimately, sustainable economic development within democratic practices is not solely a product of economic change; rather, it depends on it.

FOREIGN POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

The foreign policy agendas of South Asian countries are primarily influenced by domestic politics and, more importantly, by the nature of governance. Different types of governance shape various foreign policy priorities and decisions. For example, an autocratically governed country decides its foreign policy based on its total control over power; such a country usually pursues a pragmatic foreign policy. By contrast, multiclass-oriented diplomacy often overshadows a regime that represents and is supported by different classes. In this chapter, we argue that a country's democratic nature influences its foreign policy decisions (Pacher, 2023, pp. 471-486).

The perspective is presented against the backdrop of real politics, where ideologies are criticised, and interests are valued. Our point is that sovereignty and democracy are not the exclusive dominions of realpolitik. The foreign policy of South Asian countries is primarily influenced by the type of governance they have in place. 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 lens of three levels of analysis: systemic, state, and individual.

The types of societies significantly influence states' foreign policy decisions. 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 rather than shared values. The findings suggest that individual ideational leanings about autonomy-seeking characters shape state behaviour, and that democratic governance imposes some constraints on national policymaking. Regionalism and foreign policy decision-making in South Asian states must be analysed in terms of the types of government they have.

This section examines how diverse governance types shape foreign policy in global politics, contrasting with purely political-economy approaches. Insights challenge realist literature, offering value to social scientists analysing regional and state behaviour through regimes and individual ideation. The chapter emphasises the impact of political liberalisation on economic bloc entry, security build-ups, diplomatic norms, state character in regional policies, and human rights commitments, thereby enhancing overall exploration.

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 presents a series of case studies that provide country-specific analyses of democratic progress, with a focus 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 addresses many of these factors, a few common, particularly salient threads emerge.

History has a profound impact on the metamorphosis of Nepal's political self. In addition, the distributional networks and patterns of clientelism that solidify during such developmental periods are inextricable from, and shaped by, wider social stratifications, which then also determine power relations and distributive settlements (Emecheta, 2016, pp. 83-102). This discussion leads to one key research proposition: in contrast to examples from Western countries that have seen a transition to democracy expressed through inflating wealth, an emerging middle class, and waning patronage-based political structures, the South Asian story has not been contingent upon these developments as a principal driver of democratisation. Further, the impact of linguistic and ethno-nationalism on conditions at the state-society level has been significant, yielding a combustible mixture that can either fuel conflict or drive reconciliation, with implications for the long-term course of democracy in the region. Moreover, the politics of South Asia's states and their relationship with regional geopolitics were also heavily influenced by external great powers (Mishra, 1980, pp. 68-83).

RESULTS

The comparison offers two primary, related findings. First, the formal institutions of democracy, the constitution, the electoral system, and the tripartite division of executive, legislative, and judicial branches are enshrined in South Asia, but their actual functioning remains persistently limited. An outright design failure has not triggered this erosion of democracy. However, it is the result of chronic institutional fragilities and long-standing social inequalities (ethnic, religious, and gender-based), as well as the prominence of illiberal political practices that prioritise elites over citizens (clientelism or the lack of intra-party democracy). Second, this backward movement is met with forceful indigenous counterforces. Civil society groups, a surge of women's activism, and vibrant youth movements are powerful grassroots resistance against the authoritarian wave. Often deploying political protest and new technologies, these agents are directly contesting state accountability in a quest for a more inclusive, rights-based, and autonomous democratic formation.

This is a radical opposition to most democratic theories, rooted in the West. It moves scholarly focus from institutional design *per se* to the complex interplay between structural vulnerabilities and indigenous resilience, providing a much-needed non-Western lens on how democracy is contested and maintained in the global South.

FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH ASIAN COUNTRIES

The prevalence of elections, the spread of information, and an educated society show bright prospects for democracy in South Asia; there is much faith in democratic and related attitudes. The regional dynamics among South Asian countries, including those influenced by India to a substantial degree, also encourage governance approaches that fall outside the variant authoritarian regimes. Countries like Bhutan, India, and Nepal have strong democracies. In contrast, both Pakistan and Bangladesh have experienced periods of democracy in recent decades. On the contrary, democratic banking crises have been a long-standing issue for countries such as the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Seychelles; and, equally, if not more severe difficulties have been detected in authoritarian polities such as China and Thailand (Razin & Sadka, 2023).

The advent of contemporary technologies, notably the Internet and social media, is indeed an
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important route to mobilise efforts toward building a strong democratic foundation. The demand created by this movement forces public organisations to pay more attention to management techniques. However, even as authoritarianism continues to surge in many of these South Asian states, democratic engagement has not abated. There is also active contestation of unconstitutional actions by civil society, women's movements, and youth calling for democratic values.

On occasion, it is this violent disapproval of the suppression of democracy that speaks for the people. There is broad agreement among Economists that democracy makes for more stable economic development than autocratic rule does. Although there is no linear relationship between democracy and poverty reduction, long-term economic development can be lower risk under autocracy (Heo & Hahm, 2015, pp. 1041-1058).

In an unsettled present, haunted by the spectres of previous struggles spurred by planetary crises, rapid, continuous socio-cultural, socio-political, and socioeconomic changes can be observed. New social, cultural, and power elites come to the fore, hegemonic aspirations are in flux, ideologies shift, and, in turn, this affects the political choices of countries and societies.

CONCLUSION

This paper sought to provide a nuanced, multifaceted understanding of democratic backsliding and resilience in South Asia that did not neatly fit into Eurocentric analytical frameworks. Empirically, with few exceptions, the literature repeatedly points to the presence of formal democratic institutions, particularly constitutional and electoral arrangements across the region, that are hampered by an eternally undermining institutional fragility, endemic social inequality, and illiberal polities. Crucially, the report evidences that this reduction is being strongly opposed by powerful, place-based resistance. Civil society's resilience and the growing role of women and youth in politics give hope for a renewal of democracy from below. More generally, the findings raise challenges to current democratic theory that abstracts from the form and functioning of institutions and concentrates on internal countervailing factors as a key determinant, along with its predictors, of whether democracy would endure in South Asia, delivering important lessons for policy-makers concerned with governance and stability concerns in this strategically relevant region.

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