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The State of Democracy in South Asia: Aspiration Quotients

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The Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) convened a workshop in Singapore on 20 January 2016 to discuss and compare the cross-country findings of the State of Democracy in South Asia (SDSA) project. This international workshop was held in collaboration with the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi and Lokniti, a research network based in India.

In 2004-05, a group of South Asian scholars came together to undertake the first-ever study of the state of democracy spanning five countries of South Asia – India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The SDSA report was published by Oxford University Press (OUP) in 2008.

Following that, a second round of SDSA was launched in 2012. The workshop discussed the outcomes of this second round of study. The country-level findings presented by individual scholars essentially discussed citizens' ideas, expectations, perceptions, and their evaluations of democracy in their countries as well as the idea of democracy in general. The workshop also

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discussed dimensions like political participation and trust in institutions of democracy and governance.

Participants in the workshop highlighted the nuances of the state of democracy in each of the five countries in South Asia.

First Session

The workshop commenced with a session on the state of democracy in South Asia in general and the state of democracy in India in particular.

The first speaker of the session, **Sandeep Shastri**, Pro Vice Chancellor of the Jain University and Director of its Centre for Research in Social Sciences and Education, spoke on “Public Perceptions on the Working of Democracy in India: The gulf between promise and performance”. Analysing the findings of the Second Round of the SDSA Survey conducted in 2013, Shastri assessed the political orientation of citizens in India and their support for democracy. He highlighted the importance of identifying the ‘context’ when exploring the ‘image/imagination’ of democracy from a citizen’s perspective. One of the key findings when analysing the political orientation of the public over time was that, though the proportions of democrats and ‘indifferent’ groups remain unchanged, those supporting authoritarian rule have risen. The multiple meanings of democracy in the people’s definition of what they perceive as democracy also shaped the popular imagination about democracy. Accordingly, the survey demonstrated that welfare and ensuring freedom resonate more with the idea of democracy than the procedural aspects of democracy. The public trust in a range of political institutions was equally a measure of assessing the working of these institutions. Shastri argued that whilst there is popular support for democracy, there exists a gap between the promise and the performance of democracy, ultimately resulting in the difference between the rhetoric and the reality of politics.

Suhas Palshikar, Director, Lokniti, and Professor of Political Science at the Savitribai Phule University, Pune, spoke on ‘One Goal; Different Experiences and Different Approaches’ of the survey conducted in the five countries of South Asia. Palshikar emphasised that democracy is

yet to be accepted as the ideal in the world, including in the region of South Asia. Nevertheless, over the ten years since the first study of the people's perception about democracy, there was significant progress in the support for democracy.

It was also noteworthy that the levels of support for democracy in the five countries of South Asia were materially influenced by the different political journeys that each country had to go through during the past ten years.

Palshikar argued that there were two ways of looking at democracy – the procedure-oriented and the outcome-oriented approaches. He also pointed out that, whilst political competition was seen as a basic to democracy, the specifics of the competition have varied degrees of support. He stressed the fact that more value was placed on democratic governance bringing about a system of welfare than associating democracy only with governance.

Second Session

The second session of the workshop looked at the “State of Democracy in Pakistan and Bangladesh”. **Tawfique Haque**, Associate Professor and Director, Public Policy and Governance Program, North South University, Dhaka, presented his research findings on “Contemporary Trends and Patterns of Democracy in Bangladesh: A Perception Study”.

Haque observed how the struggle for freedom in the early 1950s, the war of independence in 1971 and the restoration of democracy in 1991 after military rule, had broader implications on the aspirations for democracy in the minds and the culture of the people in Bangladesh. His paper was based on a survey which captures the phase from 2007 to 2014. The study was conducted in 50 constituencies to identify the citizen's perception on Bangladesh's trend and pattern of democracy. The study encapsulated six broad areas; meaning of democracy, trust in institutions, governance and service delivery, perception on economy, politics and elections and perception on relations with foreign countries.

The findings of the survey revealed that the people of Bangladesh nurtured democratic aspirations under the rule of civilian government where there was more concern for

governance, responsive service-delivery, rule of law, accountability and respect for human rights. The findings also demonstrated that even though the majority preferred democracy compared to other forms of government, they lacked a clear conception about democracy itself. Regarding the citizens' satisfaction with the level of democratic values and practices, 45% were not satisfied with the state of democracy in Bangladesh. Haque concluded that trends and patterns of democracy in Bangladesh seemed to be fragile and unsustainable.

Bilal Ahmed, President of PILDAT, Islamabad, was unable to be present at the workshop due to unforeseen circumstances though he did send a PowerPoint presentation which focused on five aspects of democracy in Pakistan: trust in institutions, governance, service delivery, perceptions of the economy, politics and elections and perceptions of relations with foreign countries.

Third Session

The third session explored the “State of Democracy in Sri Lanka and Nepal”. Pradeep Peiris, from the Social Scientist's Association in Sri Lanka, presented his findings on “Sri Lanka's Experience with Democracy: Dialectics of Ethnicity and Democracy”. Peiris pointed out that, since 1931 the island's citizens participated in elections and that despite insurgencies, the civil war and a coup attempt, democracy had survived in Sri Lanka. According to the survey, an overwhelming majority of Sri Lankans have supported democracy. The recent presidential election demonstrated the Sri Lankan commitment towards a democratic system. He, however, drew attention to the fact that, in spite of encouraging developments, the ethnicised understanding and practice of democracy in Sri Lanka was a disturbing and puzzling phenomenon.

The survey in Sri Lanka was conducted among randomly-selected individuals across 24 districts, including the former conflict-zones in the island. The survey revealed an interesting finding that the experience of democracy was influenced by the individual's ethnicity. Thus, even though the Sinhala-Buddhist majority had reaped the benefits of the democratic governing system in Sri Lanka, it was surprising to see how the minorities, especially the Up-Country Tamils who have been historically marginalised and living in high levels of poverty, had more faith in a democratic system.

Peiris argued that even though democracy, as experienced in Sri Lanka, undermined liberal democratic values, it nevertheless had rescued the country's democracy at the most critical times as it did during the Presidential Election in 2015.

Krishna Hachhethu, Professor at the Central Department of Political Science, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, spoke on "Democracy in Nepal: A Gap between Imagination and Experience". Hachhethu pointed out that the promulgation of the new constitution in Nepal in 2015 had triggered an ethnic conflict and that the last survey conducted in 2013 predicted the potential ethnic divide in Nepal. The findings of the survey also revealed a gap between the citizens' imagination about democracy and their experience. For instance, even though the majority respondents preferred democracy to other forms of government, a higher percentage also perceived the state of affairs in the country to be 'undemocratic'. Similarly there was also a significant decline in the trust of political parties since 2007 as they failed to draft the new constitution within the extended period of the Constituent Assembly. The 2013 survey also revealed interesting findings such as women candidates being preferred over male candidates.

Discussion Points

The workshop concluded with a plenary session on the state of democracy in South Asia. The following issues were discussed:

1. Why does one conduct survey? Are there other quantitative methods of studying democracy?

Most other methods are elite-driven and usually comprise scholars and academicians. Public surveys, on the other hand, provide a counter-point to these views and established practices. As surveyors, it is important to keep in mind that these are public perceptions and should not be taken at face value. Public perceptions are but a slice of reality, and the real challenge is situating those perceptions in the context of the country's culture, economy and politics.

2. Findings revealed that there was an overall aspiration for democracy in South Asia. The key takeaways for policy makers were:

- i. It was important to build institutions in order to sustain the momentum of democracy in South Asia
 - ii. For democratic politics to be successful, it was necessary that politics and politicians mediate the socially existing flash points rather than aggravate them for short-term political gains
3. Is democracy the only game in town and why is it important to study democracy? There are variations in this game called democracy and that it can be grouped into four main categories:
- i. Procedural-driven conception of democracy
 - ii. Rights-driven conception of democracy
 - iii. Governance-driven conception of democracy
 - iv. Welfare-driven conception of democracy

These categories are not distinct and mutually exclusive.

Except for free and fair elections as procedure, there was not much support for procedure-driven democracy in South Asia. As far as rights-driven conception was concerned, India and Bangladesh support the right to protest, whereas in Pakistan, free media was seen as a major component of democracy. For governance, it was law and order which was seen as an essential component of democracy as perceived by the citizens in all the five countries. As for 'welfare', all countries believe it to be the only major component of democracy. However, though welfare is considered very important, unemployment-assistance is not considered to be essential in a democracy. These nuances should be considered when talking about a South Asian way of thinking on democracy.

4. After the first and second rounds of survey of democracy in South Asia, what were the common concerns?
- i. The question of diversity: Pakistan has ended the diversity issue but Nepal is still struggling with it. How these societies are going to negotiate with it is an important concern.

- ii. The balance between welfare and procedure: The critical question is: if a country provides welfare and not the procedural aspects of democracy, what do we call it? Is it a democracy or not? These are concerns that require serious consideration.
- iii. Issue of hidden affinity for the so-called non-democratic forms of governance was also another dimension revealed in the findings.

5. How were the questions of the survey formulated?

The preparation for the survey had taken two years of discussion and included questions from the following:

- i. Global Barometer questions
- ii. South Asia specific questions to allow a comparison with other countries
- iii. Country-specific questions

Though the researchers were aware of the inherent limitations of the survey method, the data/findings that were obtained were important to locate the SDSA survey in a wider context, allowing country-specific analysis, region-specific analysis and a larger global analysis.

6. Other points of discussion:

- i. After the collection of data, the question was how the data should be presented, in order to make it meaningful. It is important to work on a detailed analytical framework to explain the issues identified in the survey. Looking into the social norms of a country is equally important when working on a democracy survey. Another concern when analysing the collected data is whether the data should be analysed according to Western political theories or should it look at country-specific practices.
- ii. Most countries have agreed that the rule of law is the major responsibility of a democratic government. The major issue concerning most South Asian

states surveyed was related to the ethnic issue, and in addressing this, South Asian history played an important role.

- iii. South Asia has its own form of democratic practices and there is space for religion which cannot be easily discarded. What role does religion play and what space democracy gives to religion are issues that need to be understood and analysed.

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