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## **The New Democratic Wave and Regional Cooperation in South Asia<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

The South Asian region has experienced a democratic resurgence in the recent past. This has happened when countries in Africa and Asia have suffered a setback. According to the latest Freedom House Annual Report (2008), 34 countries performed poorly on the indicators of freedom and only 14 countries showed an improvement compared to 2007 (The National, 15 January 2009).<sup>3</sup> West Asia and North Africa remained stagnant whereas sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia suffered setbacks. If one looks at Southeast Asia, Myanmar continues to frustrate the democratic aspirations of the people and, even in Thailand, political developments have not been conducive to a healthy and sustained growth of democracy.

In contrast to these gloomy trends, there has been a marked resurgence of democracy in South Asia. Bhutan started its transition from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy in 2004 and completed the process by installing an elected legislature and a representative government in 2008. Nepal's 'people's movement' succeeded in 2006, resulting in an end to the Maoist insurgency, abolishing the monarchy and establishing a republic. An elected Constituent Assembly (CA) and a representative government took office in Nepal in August 2008. In Pakistan, the general elections were held for the National Assembly and the military regime was forced to retreat when, in September 2008, General Pervez Musharraf, who had managed to get himself elected by the outgoing parliament as a President, was replaced by Asif Ali Zardari of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). In Maldives, the one-party dominated political system was reformed to a multiparty system in 2005 and, in November 2008, a popularly elected President assumed office. He had, in an intense contest, won against Maumoon Abdul Gayoom who had been in office for 30 consecutive years. And in Bangladesh, after two years of an interim administration, a popular government, led by the Awami League, came to power in January 2009. Thus, five of the seven South Asian countries have witnessed democratic transition in a period of less than three years. The other

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<sup>3</sup> The indicators chosen for comparison in the Freedom House survey are political rights and civil liberties. They are further subdivided into electoral processes, political participation, functioning of the government, freedom of expression and belief, associational and organisational rights, rule of law and personal autonomy, and individual rights.

two South Asian countries, India and Sri Lanka, have always remained democratic and Afghanistan became a democracy in 2004.

At the international level, India joined the global efforts to promote democracy, first by joining the Community of Democracies established in 2000 and the United Nations (UN) Democracy Fund established in 2005 as a founding member. Besides these success stories, there have been democratic failures in South Asia as well. The democratic credibility of Afghanistan's Hamid Karzai regime and Sri Lanka's Mahinda Rajapaksa government has been seriously eroded. Both the countries are caught in internal conflicts. Tibet and Myanmar may not be considered as part of South Asia but they are very much integral to the overall South Asian political context, particularly after the admission of both China and Myanmar as Observers in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). In Myanmar and Tibet, protests by the people in favour of freedom and democracy, led by the monks, were crushed in 2007 and 2008 respectively. On the whole, leaving China and Myanmar aside, now there is no South Asian country left that does not have a democratic system. Almost 1.3 billion South Asians, constituting more than one-sixth of the world's population have, thus, chosen democratic governance, though this transition to democracy is still fragile and vulnerable.

### **Critical Drivers of Democracy**

A close look at the success stories of democracy in South Asia suggests that, besides other factors, there have been two critical drivers behind the recent transitions. They are the people's power and the international community. The most impressive demonstration of the people's power for democracy has been in Nepal. The Maoists of Nepal had been leading a bloody and ruthlessly violent insurgency to fight for a republican political order and socio-economic revolution for a decade since 1996. Their strategy witnessed a radical shift from a violent to a peaceful and democratic struggle. For nearly three weeks in April 2006, about eight to ten million people went onto the streets all over Nepal under the leadership of the Maoists and the Seven Party Alliance (SPA) to agitate peacefully against an autocratic monarchy. This was called *Jan Andolan-II* (People's Movement-II). The *Jan Andolan-I* was staged by the Nepalese similarly under the leadership of the political parties against the monarchy dominated party-less Panchayat System in 1989-90. That 'movement' succeeded in converting Nepal's absolute monarchy into a constitutional one but it could not curb the King's powers on a lasting basis. The King tried to scuttle the spirit of the people's movement in April 2006 by his first proclamation but he did not succeed and was forced by the agitating masses to acknowledge the supreme sovereignty of the people (Royal Proclamations, 21 and 24 April 2006).

In Pakistan, the elected parliament had since 2002 been asking General Musharraf to rescind the Legal Framework Order of 2002, under which he had acquired sweeping powers. However, the decisive turn against the military regime came in March 2007 when President Musharraf first suspended, and then sacked the Chief Justice of Supreme Court, Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry. This triggered strong protests from the lawyers who were then supported throughout the country by the media, the political groups and the people in general. General Musharraf tried to manipulate the situation to remain in power by cutting deals with the political parties and getting himself elected as President but eventually it did not work.

In the cases of Bhutan, Maldives and Bangladesh, an impression is created that the transition to democracy was a top-down process and not the direct result of grassroots pressures. This

impression is based on the fact that, in Bhutan, it was the King who initiated the process of change and offered to voluntarily surrender power in favour of representative institutions. This contention is tenable to a considerable extent as the King moved from village to village persuading his nobility and the ordinary people to accept the democratic change. However, the King was prompted in this initiative by the demand of Bhutanese of Nepali ethnic origin who had been asking for political liberalisation since the mid-1980s. Many of these Nepalese, who had taken refuge in Nepal, were getting politically radicalised in view of the raging Maoist insurgency in neighbouring Nepal. The King of Nepal, particularly, King Gyanendra who came to power in 2001, had taken a rather rigid and authoritarian attitude, turning the whole kingdom into a conflict zone. The King of Bhutan could not have been unaware of these developments. He prudently decided to avoid the path travelled by his neighbouring monarchy.

In Maldives also, the process of political reforms were initiated by President Gayoom in 2004 and the final elections to presidency which lost him his power were also conducted under his administration. However, President Gayoom's initiative was in reaction to public protests and demand for political change since 2003. These protests had been sparked by the death of a youth in custody in September 2003 and were sustained and reinforced subsequently by the demands of human rights protection and political liberalisation.

In Bangladesh, the interim government had the strong backing of the army and it wanted to alter the matrix of power by keeping two of the most powerful party leaders, Sheikh Hasina Wajid of the Awami League and Begum Khaleda Zia of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), completely out of the political process. The suspicion of the army wanting to create a permanent position for itself in the political structure continued to loom during the interim period of 2007-2008 (ICG Report, 2008). However, the people's protests against such manoeuvres and inherent popular strength of the political parties, notwithstanding their intense mutual rivalry and emotional antipathy of their supreme leaders, did not let this happen.

A notable aspect of the new democratic wave in South Asia is the role of the civil society. The primary responsibility of mobilising masses in democratic struggles is that of the political parties. However, in South Asia, in the two most critical cases of Nepal and Pakistan, while the political parties were still confused and lacking in confidence to take on the autocratic rulers, the civil society groups came forcefully forward to sustain the democratic struggle. In Nepal, the King's 'coup' of 1 February 2005 put the political parties in jeopardy as all their leaders were either arrested or forced into underground operations. Before the King's move, the political parties were vying with each other to seek royal favour to come to power. The civil society groups that had earlier been pleading for peace in Nepal and were even mobilising popular support against the Maoist violence now took on an active role to mobilise political resistance to the King's autocratic moves. They worked at several levels, from strengthening the Citizens' Movement for the Restoration of Democracy to evolving a consensus among the mainstream parties, and between them and the Maoists. They also worked to establish links between the domestic struggle for democracy and the international community (Devraj Dahal, 2006; and Saubhagya Shah, 2008). Leadership in this respect was provided by the intellectuals as well as the media. Unfortunately, after the victory of the 'people's movement' in April 2006, Nepal's civil society movement became ineffective in keeping the political parties on track of their promised establishment of inclusive democracy. For the parties and their leaders, the struggle for power seems to have a priority over their promised commitment to the people to build a new democratic Nepal. The

civil society movement became internally weakened due to differences among the leadership to act as a watchdog over the political parties. The media, however, continues to highlight the failures of the political class and, in turn, suffers the state's wrath.

In the case of Pakistan, the political parties were willing to play by the rules defined by the military regime and President Musharraf. One of the biggest parties, the PPP, had even struck a deal with the military to let General Musharraf continue as a civilian President in return for dropping the corruption charges against the party leader, Benazir Bhutto, and her husband, Zardari, and getting the party to share power. The PPP was willing to compromise with General Musharraf both on his sweeping powers and the sacking of the judges. It was the lawyers who put up a stiff resistance on the question of the independence of the judiciary and the demand of the restoration of the arbitrarily sacked judges. This resistance then gathered political support from the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), headed by Nawaz Sharif, and, subsequently, also from the PPP. Gradually, the lawyers' resistance sparked a robust political movement for the removal of General Musharraf. Thus, the lawyers took the lead as a civil society group to strengthen the movement for the restoration of democracy. The Asian Human Rights Commission described the lawyers' movement as the "vanguard of democracy" (Statement, March 2008). Years of military rule in Pakistan had not allowed much scope for the civil society groups to assert in favour of democracy. Earlier, the women's rights groups had gone onto the streets against the military regime at the cost of being imprisoned and harassed. The media had also constructively used the freedom gained under the military regime to voice support for democracy (S. Akbar Zaidi, 2008).

The role of the civil society was present in some form or the other but it was not very critical in the democratic wave in the rest of South Asia. There was no civil society involvement in the process of democratisation in Bhutan. The opening of the system did allow some proliferation of the media where democracy was supported and differing viewpoints were cautiously voiced. However, the ethnic Bhutanese dominated nobility and the people in general, who were approached and consulted by the King, appeared reluctant to support democratisation (Karma Galay, 2001; and William Dalrymple, 2008). The demand for democracy in Bhutan had often been raised by the Nepali ethnic community mostly living in the southern belt of the kingdom or as refugees in Nepal.

In the case of Maldives, the struggle for democracy was, as noted already, sparked by a human rights issue of the custodian death of a young boy. The principal role in raising the issue and carrying it forward was, however, played by those who had been alienated from the Gayoom regime. The civil society groups either did not exist or were dependent on the regime (Minivan News, 28 July 2005; and UNHCR, 2007). However, once the reforms process was initiated and the political parties were allowed to function, the pressure for democratisation gathered momentum.

In Bangladesh, though the civil society groups and a plethora of international non-government organisations (NGOs) stood for democracy, none of them really opposed the caretaker government and its efforts to change the contours of party structure and political dynamics (ICG Report, 2008). The credit for the manner in which the restoration of democracy has taken place in Bangladesh in the midst of varied speculations and doubts must go to the political parties who have been able to hold on to their support bases, particularly with the help of their respective student/youth constituencies, despite facing severe odds.

The international community played a very decisive role in most of the democratising South Asian countries. The role of international community in Nepal and Pakistan was very significant. Since 2002, when King Gyanendra moved to curb democratic processes in Nepal, the international community, particularly India, the United States and the European Union tried to restrain him. The King's move to take over direct power in 2005 was disapproved by them. The external responses, however, evolved gradually from persuading the King to restore democratic processes to eventually supporting his opponents to overthrow him. Throughout 2005, the international community tried its best to plead with the King in this regard. The Indian Prime Minister personally talked to him and even assured him that if he took steps to reverse his decisions, arms supply and other assistance could be restored (Indian Express, 25 April 2005). Notwithstanding the nuanced differences and varying points of emphases in their respective approaches, the United States and the European Union, including the United Kingdom, generally followed the Indian lead. When India became frustrated by the King's defiance wherein he refused to honour his assurances given to the Indian Prime Minister personally, Indian diplomacy moved to facilitate the united front of the SPA with the Maoists to oppose the King's regime.<sup>4</sup> A 12-point understanding between the SPA and the Maoists was concluded in November 2005 in India to launch a joint peaceful struggle to remove the "autocratic monarchy" and establish an "absolute democracy" in Nepal (Kathmandu Post, 22 November 2005). The United States and many of the European Union members were not very enthusiastic about giving legitimacy to the Maoists but went along with it. It was this understanding that precipitated the 'people's movement' in the first week of April 2006 and led to the fall of the monarchy.

In Pakistan, the United States and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies, who are fighting the "war on terror" in Afghanistan, had strong stakes in ensuring the cooperation of the military regime. After fighting for five years, it gradually started to emerge that Pakistan's military regime was not fully cooperating with the international community in the terror war (Ashley Tellis, 2002; and Frederic Grare, 2007). However, in order to continue with the war, the United States could not alienate the Pakistan army as an ally. That is why the United States wanted Pakistan's transition to only a quasi-democracy through the broadening of the regime by involving democratic forces without denting the critical role being played by the army in Pakistan's security decision making. This drove the United States to work out an alliance between General Musharraf and Benazir. Even after Benazir's assassination, the western support for the Musharraf-PPP understanding continued. The Saudi royal regime, which has always had close political ties with the Pakistan army and the political leadership, also facilitated the return of Sharif to Pakistan to participate in the democratic struggle and the elections of 2008 (International Herald Tribune, 25 November 2007). Even India had preferred the continuation of General Musharraf as a civilian president in the interest of keeping the Pakistani extremist groups and their cross-border terrorism against India under control. India's National Security Adviser, M. K. Narayanan, believed that Musharraf's exit from the presidency had left "a big vacuum" in Pakistan (The Strait Times, Singapore, 11 August 2008; and The Hindu, New Delhi, 30 July 2007). The international community did not have much to do with the lawyers' movement that aimed at General Musharraf's removal. However, notwithstanding its soft corner for General Musharraf, the international community accepted his removal and quickly adjusted with a

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<sup>4</sup> The SPA was formed in Nepal in May 2005 to oppose the King's takeover. It demanded the restoration of the dissolved parliament. The parties that joined this alliance were the Nepali Congress, the Nepali Congress (Democratic), the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist), the Nepal Workers and Peasants' Party, the Nepal Sadbhawana Party (A), the United Left Front and the Peoples Front. The royalist parties did not join this alliance.

new civilian President in Zardari. That marked the complete institutional restoration of democracy in Pakistan.

What needs to be noted in the role of the international community in Nepal and Pakistan is that it has stood for democracy in both these countries, though without a complete break from the past authoritarian regimes. However, when under the pressure of the popular movement, the past regimes were completely thrown out. The international community quickly accepted the radical change and proceeded to work with the new regimes. In Maldives and Bhutan, the international community supported political reforms and transition to democracy. The United States and the United Kingdom strongly supported the establishment of the interim government and its initial moves to purge politics from corrupt political leaders (ICG Report, 2008). The international community also discouraged any attempt on the part of the Bangladesh army to seek a political role for itself in the new arrangement. International support proved to be a key factor in the interim government's efforts to hold free and fair elections in December 2008 which resulted in the Awami League's rise to power with an absolute majority. Both India and the United States welcomed the restoration of democracy in Bangladesh.

It is in order to mention here briefly that a section of the international community did not help the new wave of democracy in South Asia. China, Russia and Pakistan continued to support King Gyanendra of Nepal against the democratic storm. China also stood solidly with General Musharraf when the public pressure for him to go was building up. These countries have, however, quickly reconciled with the democratic forces and have moved fast to improve their political and strategic relations with the new leadership.

### **Fragile Institutional Base and Vulnerable Democratic Processes**

On the whole, the democratic transition in South Asia could not have possibly succeeded without the rise of the people's power and the support extended to this power by the international community. Notwithstanding its radical character, the democratic transition that has taken place in South Asia is still fragile. The main challenge that the new wave of democracy faces in South Asia is its consolidation – the translation of aspirations and values unleashed during the process of transition into concrete and viable institutions. The degree and nature of this challenge varies from country to country.

It is in Nepal and Pakistan that the consolidation of democratic transition confronts major hurdles. In Nepal, a new democratic state has to be built on the debris of a 250-year old monarchical order. It took Nepal two years to hold elections to the CA after the victory of the 'people's movement' in April 2006. Even after the elections, the assumption of office by the elected government was delayed by over three months due to political wrangling. The CA is duty bound to frame a new constitution for an inclusive democracy within a period of two years. However, at this point in time, that is, 10 months after the elections, though the process is within the time schedule laid, the signs of seriousness and commitment are lacking. The political parties have just initiated the process to evolve their respective internal positions on critical constitutional issues. The Maoists have come out with their own draft constitution to indicate where they stand on critical aspects of the nature of the system, distribution of powers, character of federalism, etc. The most ticklish issues in the constitution would be the framing of federal principles and devolution of powers on the one hand, and the structure of the executive, that is, whether it should be Presidential or a Parliamentary system, on the other. Many political leaders voice their apprehensions that a federal structure, particularly if

built with the principle of self-determination which the *Madhes*<sup>5</sup> and the ethnic/tribal groups are demanding, will result in the disintegration of the Nepali state (ICG Report, 2007 a & b). There is also resistance from Hindu fundamentalist quarters against the new state being secular in character.

Yet another complicated issue is that of integrating the Maoists armed cadres into the national armed forces. The Nepal army, supported by sections of the political parties are resisting the integration, ignoring the fact that it was accepted, in principle, as a part of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed between the SPA and the Maoists to put Nepal's 10-year old civil war (Maoist insurgency) to an end. The peace process in Nepal will not come to its logical conclusion until the CPA is honestly and sincerely implemented by all the concerned parties. There are several issues related to the CPA that need urgent attention and sincere implementation. These include the restoration of the properties occupied by the Maoists during the insurgency; the role of the Maoists armed cadres and the youth wing (Youth Communist League); the reconstruction and rehabilitation of all those affected by the internal conflict; the questions of truth and reconciliation; of impunity and the rule of law; of press freedom, human rights and democratic functioning of political parties, particularly the Maoists; and, above all, of governance and economic development.

In Pakistan, the basic constitutional structure remains but with its distortions introduced during the military rule. The agreement between the two mainstream parties, the PPP and the PML-N, on undoing the concentrated powers in the Presidency has not been implemented. These powers were bestowed in the President through the 17<sup>th</sup> Amendment when General Musharraf was the President. This amendment became operative in December 2004. The PPP and PML-N had agreed in their Charter of Democracy to dissolve these powers. Similarly, the independence of the judiciary has not been fully restored. The question of the judiciary precipitated a serious crisis in Pakistan in March 2009 pitting the two mainstream political parties against each other. This crisis was resolved, at least temporarily, after President Zardari compromised on the question and promised to reinstate the dismissed Chief Justice Chaudhry.

There are vast areas in the frontier regions where the writ of the central government does not run effectively. Religious extremism continues to thrive on poverty and ignorance and confronts stable, peaceful, rational and humane governance. Sectarian conflict between the *Shias* and *Sunnis* continues unabated. Global terrorism, of which Pakistan has emerged as a hub, is a source of considerable pressure on the growth and survival of democratic norms and institutions in Pakistan. There are regions in Pakistan like the Swat valley, affected by global terrorism, where religious law (*Sharia*) has been enforced, restricting the movement of women without proper authority (Daily Times, 3 January 2009). Though the army has been institutionally withdrawn from politics and is seen to be backing the civilian government, it continues to wield enormous power and clout when it comes to the critical issues of security, foreign policy and even the domestic power structure (Shuja Nawaz, 2008).

There are two factors behind the fragility of democratic processes and institutions in Nepal and Pakistan. One is that the initial political consensus built around the struggle for democratisation has been eroded under the pressures of the struggle for power. In Nepal, the

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<sup>5</sup> Madhesh is geographically the southern narrow (about 20 kilometres wide along the border with India) flat land of Nepal. It is inhabited by persons of Indian origin, divided by various caste, linguistic and ethnic groups. They constitute 40-45 percent of Nepal's total population but complain of neglect and discrimination by the hill people in the country's political and socio-economic life for the past 60 years and more.

consensus for building a new Nepal that brought the SPA and the Maoists together has lost its 'jelling' power as the other mainstream parties have not been able to accept the emergence of the Maoists as the strongest political force in the CA elections. This is evident in the Nepali Congress (NC) staying away from the post-election coalition government. In particular, former Prime Minister and the NC leader, G. P. Koirala, has not reconciled to being not accepted by the Maoists as the first republican President of Nepal. There is also a breakdown of consensus within each of the political parties, including the Maoists. In the scramble for power, promises and commitments made earlier have lost their meaning. There are also new claimants to power as evident in the rise of the *Madhesh* parties and ethnic (*Janjati*) groups.

This is equally true in Pakistan where the PPP and the PML-N, which were in the forefront to bring about democratic transition, have fallen apart. The PML-N withdrew its ministers in May 2008 from the PPP-led coalition government on the questions of presidential powers and the restoration of the judiciary. The PML-N was not prepared to accept Zardari as the President but had to reconcile with it in the absence of any other option. Sharif has called Zardari a dictator and criticised the PPP government many times for deviating from the mutually-accepted Charter of Democracy (The News, 22 January 2008). The March 2009 crisis was precipitated by the court's disqualification of the Sharif brothers from contesting for and holding on to public offices. The Sharif brothers gave a call of "long march" and forced Zardari to concede to their demands of restoring the independence of the judiciary and reversing the adverse political decision on them.

The second factor is that those ousted from power in the process of democratic transition have continued to work to discredit the newly-emerged democratic forces. The King in Nepal initially kept a low profile but has started becoming politically active. The army in Nepal which was loyal to the monarchy is not willing to subordinate itself to the elected Maoist leadership and is creating hurdles in the proposed integration of the Maoist armed cadres into Nepal army. The army has gone on to defy the elected ministers, the UN mission which is 'managing' the arms and the two (National and the Maoist) armies and even the judiciary on the issue of additional recruitments. The royalist parties have also not cooperated with the new political players in Nepal. Kathmandu is afloat with speculations that the King would soon enter into active politics with the help of the NC and the royalist parties.

In Pakistan, the army continues to be perceived as the real source of power. Its latest example was seen in Pakistan's refusal to send the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) chief, as promised, to India with regard to the Mumbai terror attacks in the last week of November 2008.<sup>6</sup> It was also reported that the United States' pressures on Pakistan's counter-terrorism policy were dividing the army and the civilian leadership (www.voanews.com, 1 October 2008). The differences between President Zardari and Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani on the sacking of the National Security Adviser, Mahmud Ali Durrani, in the first week of January 2009 became public and were seen as being fuelled by the army. In general, Pakistan's new democratic government is widely being perceived as inconsistent and discordant in its approach towards some of the most sensitive issues facing the country. If this situation persists, the possibility of the army stepping up its interference in political affairs and even staging a return to direct politics cannot be ruled out. There are analysts who believe that

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<sup>6</sup> In his first tele-conversation with the Indian Prime Minister, Pakistan's Prime Minister, Yousuf Raza Gilani, promised to send the ISI chief to India to help investigate Pakistani roots of the terrorists. However, within 48 hours, after the Army Chief, General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani's talks with the Pakistan President and Prime Minister, this decision was reversed. It was believed that the Army General had reservations on the ISI chief being sent to India. (rediff news, 29 November 2008; and The Dawn, 29 November 2008).



General Musharraf may not be averse to coming back to active politics. He himself publicly disclosed his willingness to be the President again (Hindustan Times, 9 March 2009).

Democratic institutions and norms in other South Asian countries that have experienced the new democratic wave will evolve gradually. Bhutan has taken only a preliminary step towards democratisation. Institutions like political parties and free press will take a lot of time and effort to mature. Awareness of democratic norms and practices, rights and obligations among people at large will also grow only gradually. The opened political system of Bhutan should, however, keep pace with rising expectations. In Maldives, democratic institutions may consolidate faster under the dynamic leadership of new representatives. However, the outgoing President still has considerable support in the existing legislature and bureaucracy. The new President will have to move carefully to strengthen democratisation so as not to disturb the prevailing political balance. In Bangladesh, the people have expressed a clear choice in choosing their new rulers. The ruling Awami League and its leader, Sheikh Hasina, must make sure that their priorities are so organised that “revenge and rancour”<sup>7</sup> are not encouraged at the cost of constructively building a secular and functional democracy to effectively address the genuine aspirations of the people. The opposition BNP also needs to get out of its old tactics of paralysing parliament through walkouts and boycotts (The Economist, 29 January 2009). The mutiny staged by the Bangladesh Rifles (the border security force) against the army on 26 and 27 February 2009 has also brought to light the delicate question of civil-military relations that can easily disrupt the democratic processes.

The challenge to democracy in both the new wave and established democracies in South Asia is multi-fold. It arises from its primordial values and identities such as caste, religion and region-based political loyalties and mobilisation, its fragile and stillborn democratic institutions, and its governance and resources to deliver development that can meet the unfolding aspirations of the people. The international community, that had helped the new wave democracies to emerge, seems to have relapsed back into its respective self-centred strategic perspectives in dealing with the challenges of democracy in South Asia. No less formidable is the threat posed by rising extremism and terrorism in South Asia that is fast destroying democratic values and institutions in the region. No South Asian country is free from this threat of terrorism and extremism.

### **Democratisation and Regional Cooperation**

The new democratic wave in South Asia is bound to provide impetus to the process of regional cooperation and integration both within and beyond the framework of the SAARC. There are two ways in which the democratic drive in South Asia will add to the SAARC momentum. One is that the spread and consolidation of democracy in South Asia bridges the democratic divide that exists between India and its other neighbours. Except for Sri Lanka, all other South Asian neighbours of India were non-democratic most of the time. The forces of democracy drew spontaneous and natural support and sympathy from India, both officially and at the popular levels, in their respective struggles against the authoritarian regimes. Accordingly, the spillover of such struggles generated tensions and contradictions in intra-regional and bilateral relations, which in turn adversely affected the regional cooperation process.

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<sup>7</sup> The revenge and rancour of the Awami League in Bangladesh politics refers to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s commitment to punish the perpetrators of the August 1975 coup in which her father and the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was assassinated with his entire family.

The monarchies and the military regimes surrounding India in the region found its democratic order a threat to their respective stability and perpetuation. Internal turmoil in these countries rising from the struggles for democracy intensified and reinforced mutual adversarial images vis-à-vis India. The spillover of the internal turmoil within these countries into India affected the overall context of regional relations, including cooperation through the SAARC. Most of the democratic dissenters in the neighbouring South Asian countries have sought shelter and support in India against their respective authoritarian regimes. The Nepalese monarchy often mobilised anti-Indian nationalism to suppress its democratic opponents by dubbing them as being Indian agents (S. D. Muni, 1992; Louise Brown, 1996; and B. C. Upreti, 2003). The 2005 SAARC Summit was postponed to express India's concern about the setback to democracy in Nepal when King Gyanendra assumed direct power. The military regimes in Pakistan have legitimised their control of polity in the name of threats from India and often tied the SAARC cooperation, including trade, with the resolution of the Kashmir issue. The SAARC suffered on the account of the spillover of internal conflicts between India and Sri Lanka (1990) as also between India and Bangladesh (1992).

The bridging of the democratic divide will naturally reduce such tensions and stimulate better regional understanding and cooperation, giving a positive push to the SAARC process. The contention here is not that democratic politics in South Asia will result in perfect political harmony in the region. The competitive democratic dynamics for securing power in the respective countries will surely raise many demands and assertions on the close neighbours but the democratisation of all the SAARC countries will facilitate a broader political understanding among the regimes, create a better atmosphere for negotiated and mutually-advantageous resolution of disputes and disagreements, and drive the countries towards enhanced economic and social cooperation. This was reflected during the last two SAARC Summits, that is, in New Delhi in 2007 and in Colombo in 2008, held after the success of the democratic wave, where no political squabbles were evident as the accent was on economic development among all the South Asian leaders (Hindustan Times, 4 and 5 April 2007; and SAARC Summit Documents, 2007 and 2008).

Secondly, democratic regimes depend upon popular endorsement for their legitimacy and survival unlike authoritarian regimes. The people in the region aspire for development and a better life. They are not unduly obsessed with conflictual issues and want greater people-to-people exchanges, freer movement across the borders, greater peace and greater growth. To achieve that, the countries have to cooperate and the SAARC is the only regional mechanism to promote such cooperation. Democratic regimes may find it politically rewarding to themselves, in the context of building and nursing their respective constituencies of support, to pursue the developmental issues through the implementation of the SAARC agenda. Active and greater participation of the people, enabled and encouraged by democratic systems, boost greater productivity and development (International IDEA, Democracy Round Table, June 2008). Greater cooperation will also energise business constituencies in support of the respective democratic regimes in South Asia. That is why even the Maoists leaders of Nepal, after their popular endorsement in the CA elections, have started talking about "economic revolution" within a liberal framework (Kathmandu Post, 16 and 24 April 2008; and The Rising Nepal, 25 September 2008). Such measures are bound to contribute positively to the dynamics of regional cooperation and radically improve bilateral relations between India and Nepal.

For the past few years, people at the grassroots levels in India and Pakistan are asserting for greater bilateral cooperation. The 2005 earthquake in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir generated

open popular calls in Pakistan to accept India's help in the rescue and reconstruction efforts. The opening up of the political space and freedom of expression that flows from democratic functioning is giving voices to businessmen on both sides in favour of cooperation. Highlighting the fact that democracy and development go together, Sharif recently blamed the military rulers for Pakistan's weak economic plight. "Pakistan was run by military rulers for almost 34 years, which caused shortages of wheat, power and energy", he added (The Daily Times, 10 September 2008).

Pakistan's relationship with India is key to the growth of the SAARC. A democratic Pakistan has indicated a greater enthusiasm to improving both economic and political relations with India. President Zardari's interview with the Wall Street Journal on 5 October 2008 may be recalled where he said that India was no "threat" to Pakistan and described the Kashmiri militants as terrorists as well as emphasised on increasing economic cooperation between the two countries. Subsequently, he also assured that Pakistan would not be the first to use nuclear weapons against India (Indian Express, 24 November 2008). The terror attacks on Mumbai have vitiated India-Pakistan relations but it is hoped that the damage would be repaired as soon as Pakistan is showing increasing willingness to cooperate in bringing the culprits to book (Times of India, 10 January 2009).

An important feature of the SAARC process has been the adoption of the SAARC Development Goals (SDG) and the SAARC Social Charter at the Summit of 2004 in Islamabad. Both the SDGs and the Social Charter, though do not derive their legitimacy and sustenance from democratic political orders, are rooted into democratic values and people welfare. The SDGs are divided into four categories of Livelihood (eradication of hunger and poverty, empowerment of poor, women and children, and affordable justice); Health (maternal, child and public health); Education (primary education and universal literacy); and Environment (forest cover, water, air and soil quality, biodiversity and hazardous waste). The Social Charter places "people at the centre of development" and aims to promote "participatory governance, human dignity, social justice and solidarity at national, regional and global levels" (Social Charter, Article II, 2.1 and 2.vi). The Social Charter highlights the goals of poverty alleviation, health, human resource development, rights of women and child, population stabilisation and drug de-addiction. Thus, we see that the SDGs, the Social Charter and the democratisation process in South Asia are mutually reinforcing. The South Asian civil society has come forward to expand and fortify the Social Charter by introducing democratic and human rights left out in it by introducing a "Citizen's Social Charter" (Rehman Sobhan, 2005). It may be noted here that, following the democratisation of South Asia, a greater emphasis in the SAARC meetings is being laid on the implementation of the SDGs and the Social Charter. The adoption of the Charter of SAARC Development Fund at the Colombo Summit in August 2008 was a significant move in this respect. This fund will expedite the implementation of the SDGs and the Social Charter objectives. Some of the SDGs, such as halving the proportion of people in poverty by 2010, may, however, not be achieved.

### **Appraisal: What can the International Community and the European Union do?**

The new wave of democracy is an important positive development in South Asia and of far reaching consequences. It demonstrates, without doubt, the great upsurge in democracy in the region. This wave, however, is still fragile and vulnerable to various pressures which, in turn, call for concerted efforts both at the domestic as well as external levels to help sustain the wave and build viable and enduring institutions and processes. An important section of the

international community, particularly India, the United States and the members of the European Union, played a supportive role in the unfolding of this wave. This role will have to be continued to stabilise and sustain the processes of democratisation. The international community will have to remain constructively engaged to help the newly-emerged democratic forces to reinforce democratic aspirations and values and institutionalise them into firm and durable structures of inclusive political decision making, economic development and social evolution.

In building and sustaining democracy in South Asia, the European Union stands in a special position. The European Union's commitment to democracy has comparatively been more involved and sincere as compared to other members of the international community who have looked at the question of democracy in strategic terms and used or abused it at times to promote their perceived strategic interests. The European Union has also launched a policy of greater engagement with South Asia in the context of building democracy since 2004. Its members, especially the Scandinavian countries and Switzerland, are perceived as ideal examples of humane and democratic governance. The problem with the European Union's commitment to democracy is that it has, in the past, made compromises with the United States' position under strategic pressures. The European Union is also not seen as a cohesive political entity as its members have varying degrees of commitments when it comes to promoting human and democratic values in various parts of the developing world.

It is accepted by the European Union that democracies are not imposed or imported from outside. They evolve on the basis of the genius of the people, their historical and cultural contexts, their political legacies and socio-economic conditions. The European Union's attempts should, therefore, avoid its own ideological baggage while committing itself to the democracy building task. In the European Union context, civil society institutions have become robust and vibrant, and this leads to the assumption, in relation to the developing world, that the state is in conflict with the people and their interests. To weaken or bypass the state may not be the best way of approaching the people in a region like South Asia. The failure of governance often arises from the distortions and vulnerabilities of the state. These distortions have to be corrected no doubt. The European Union can share its historical experience and best practices in this respect but without putting them as preconditions for developmental assistance. As far as possible, this assistance should also be disbursed in collaboration and coordination with the recipient state than by bypassing it through the instrumentalities of NGOs. The need is to change the character of the state, not to weaken it. The state, in fact, needs to be strengthened if it has to be made more responsive. This is irrespective of the ideology of the regime in power. For instance, a communist, a Maoist party or a religious group has come to power through a genuine democratic process and enjoys popular support, then that government should be supported without any attempt to undermine or discredit its leadership.

The process of democracy has to have different thrusts, pace and priorities in countries such as Nepal that was ruled for 250 years by a feudal monarchy and Pakistan where the military has come to become a state by itself. In each of these countries, there are different levels of awareness, degrees of aspirations and expectations, qualities of leadership and social moorings and resilience of their people. The international community in general and the European Union in particular, will, therefore, through intensive interaction with each of the forces representing democratic transition, find out as to what precisely is required and how best it can be pursued (James Mackie and Julia Zinke, 2006). While preparing the packages of development and other assistance, the members of the international community would

have to learn from the Swedish experience of listening to the recipients' request and assessing the real need (Therese Boolin, 2007). The need is to evolve a country-by-country approach when it comes to specifics.

The European Union also has to guard against "how not to build democracy". There has been a considerable emphasis on poverty alleviation programmes in the European Union's aid package to South Asia and other regions. While poverty alleviation is required in developing countries, it does not have a *necessary* correlation with democracy-building initiatives. Poverty alleviation programmes can be carried out unrelated to the nature of the system; be it a democracy, a monarchy or a military dictatorship. In undemocratic and quasi-democratic countries, the programmes of poverty alleviation would, if at all, help legitimise and reinforce the prevailing system. Therefore, where democracies are stable, poverty alleviation may help, but in nascent democracies such as the new wave democracies in South Asia, priorities are far more complex and challenging. It is also intriguing to note that though the international community has been helping in poverty alleviation in South Asia and also elsewhere for decades now, the levels of poverty refuse to go down. Is it not time to revisit the concepts and policy packages involved in "poverty alleviation" and redesign the programmes? The emphasis needs to be on the programmes of economic empowerment and access to means of earning in the long run. The "basic needs" approach, food aid, etc. is good for meeting contingencies and special requirements on a time bound programme.

The same can be said about the protection and promotion of human rights. A number of western NGOs are involved in the field with support from the European Union countries. The questions of political rights and freedoms are raised which again may keep pressure on the regimes that are violating and ignoring the rights of their people. Human rights are an essential component of democratic structures but by protecting human rights on individual basis, one cannot build or strengthen democracy. Here again, emphasis could be on supporting the human rights institutions such as the establishment of National Human Rights Commissions, robust rule of law and a dynamic media. Selecting "prisoners of conscience" is welcome but the role of such efforts in building or sustaining democracies is very limited and marginal.

Each of the democratising South Asian country has its own challenges. In Pakistan, for instance, terrorism and its fallout poses a great threat to the consolidation of democratic processes. While the United States and its NATO allies are fighting the "war on terror" militarily, the social roots of spreading extremism that feed terrorism and instability in Pakistan are not adequately looked after. This is where players such as the European Union can come forward and work in fields of education, social awareness and employment generation. Similarly, in Nepal, the peace process, unleashed with the victory of the 'people's movement' has not been brought to its logical end. There, as already noted, are critical issues of security sector reforms, impunity and rule of law, truth and reconciliation, and reconstruction and rehabilitation of a conflict-torn society. These issues will not be resolved if the peace process is not carried forward constructively. Until this is done, democratic consolidation and institution-building, including the drafting of the constitution, will not proceed smoothly. The state in Nepal has to be rebuilt, and rebuilt anew on the foundations of inclusive polity, inclusive society and inclusive economy. This will require huge investments in skill, patience, leadership, and financial and intellectual resources.

We have not focused our attention on Sri Lanka in this paper, since there was no case of a new democratic wave in Sri Lanka. However, in the context of the military defeat of the

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, there is an urgent need of a peace process. In the course of the military conflict, Sri Lanka has suffered not only economically, but also on the humanitarian front. Many of its fine democratic traditions such as a free press and the freedom of expression have been seriously dented. A meaningful peace process that addresses the legitimate aspirations of the minority Tamil community is an absolute must to restore and preserve the democratic institutions in Sri Lanka.

In general, the primary need of nascent democracies in South Asia is the reinforcement of democratic values and aspirations. The areas for the international community to help in South Asia include spreading the awareness, institutionalising democratic norms and practices, including at the level of political parties and social groups, and delivering development through good governance. The international community is already engaged in some of these areas and those left out may be covered. The cost of not doing so will be chaos and conflict in one of the world's most populous region which is willing and prepared to remain democratic.

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