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Statehood and governance: challenges in South Asia

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Statehood and Governance: Challenges in South Asia

In contrast to some other regions, the long-term trend in South Asia – comprising Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka – since 1991 has not been towards more democracy. The significant exception is India, where democratic structures are holding their ground. Political instability and violent conflicts are frequent; achieving a complete monopoly of power poses problems for almost every country. Democratic legitimization is demanded

by many people, but in fact democratic, religious and ideological forms of legitimacy as well as clientelism exist side by side. While competence for macroeconomic regulation is growing nearly everywhere, there are major deficiencies in the areas of security, the legal system and social welfare in most countries. Economic growth provides scope for policies of social adjustment and sustainable development, but they have yet to be adequately exploited.

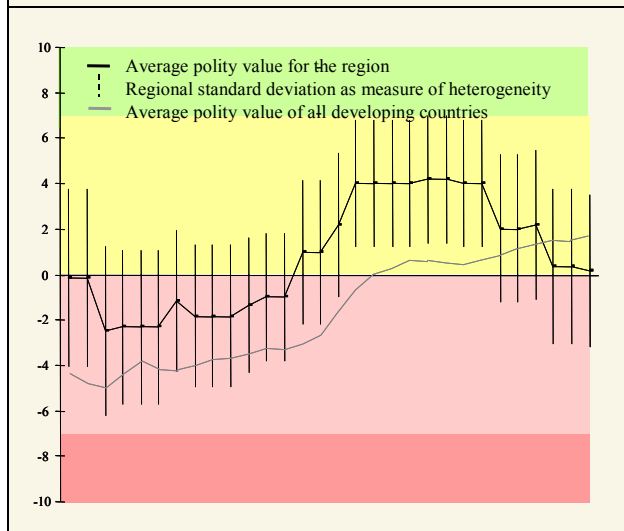
1. Stability and political transformation

With the considerable heterogeneity of political structures in South Asia, instability and violent forms of conflict are widespread. Mechanisms for the peaceful balancing of interests are still underdeveloped or are underused because of the political motives of individual actors. In most countries leading elites have lacked the ability and the political will to resolve such conflicts with historic causes as those being fought for Afghanistan and Kashmir or to reduce social and ethnic tensions. The people's demands for a share of power, resources and development opportunities have been paid too little attention by the elites, especially those in Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, resulting in separatism and civil war in Sri Lanka's case. Disputes over borders and water resources and migration have led to sometimes violent conflicts between India and Bangladesh. Five of the region's eight countries are listed among the 25 most critical nations in the Failed States Index 2007: Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. In the case of the World Bank's Political Stability and Absence of Violence indicator, most of the region's countries score low.

In contrast to many other regions, the scores for the average democracy level have not risen since the 1990s; after 1998 they fell (see Figure 1). Although there have been numerous regime changes since the 1990s, some associated with attempts to establish or restore democratic structures, the results have been uncertain (Nepal, Bangladesh) or must be regarded as retrograde steps (Pakistan). In Sri Lanka and Pakistan the lack of will or ability of political elites to make changes has led to the solidification of power structures and greater repression of political opponents. As in Pakistan, periods of autocratic rule and attempts to restore democratically legi-

timised governments have alternated in Nepal. India, meanwhile, is holding its own as the world's largest democracy, despite social tensions and such deficiencies of political institutions as inadequate democracy within parties, numerous cases of corruption and the danger of religious differences being exploited for populist reasons. As mass poverty in rural areas has not been alleviated to any decisive extent and socio-economic inequalities have not been reduced, left-wing extremist rebel movements have gained strength. In the special case of Bhutan, the king has initiated the development of democratic institutions of his own volition.

Figure 1: Average democracy value for South Asia (1975–2004) (6 countries)



Source: Polity IV (www.cidcm.umd.edu/polity). The scale stretches from -10 to +10. The higher the value, the more democratic the features of a country's polity

2. Dimensions of governance and statehood

Legitimacy: co-existence of different forms

Traditional forms of the legitimization of power have generally waned in importance, but the consequences of this have varied. In Nepal King Gyanendra failed in his attempt in 2006 to establish autocratic rule. In Bhutan King Jigme Singye Wangchuk has relinquished some functions and some power. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, on the other hand, it has proved impossible to involve traditional authorities such as clan elders and religious leaders of an older school constructively in the legitimization and stabilisation of the state.

Nor are there any clearly recognisable tendencies in the religious legitimization of government. The growth of Muslim influence on politics in Pakistan and Bangladesh is in most cases a concomitant of struggles between competing parties for power and so a reflection of the political weakness of ruling elites rather than a sign of the strength of Muslim movements. Claims of religious legitimization continue to play a role in the antagonism between India and Pakistan. While a secular image of the state predominates in India, despite Hindu nationalist trends, Pakistan has seen itself as a Muslim state since its inception. However, in Pakistan, too, power and resources lie at the heart of most differences and alliances. Moreover, its involvement in the international fight against terrorism, which the Musharraf regime was unable to avoid, is seen as incompatible with the Pakistani government's claim to pursue policy in keeping with Islam. Large sections of the Muslim population reject this fight as heteronomy directed against their own identity. Aspects of religious legitimization are similarly relevant in Bangladesh. Of the two most important parties, whose rivalry had dominated the country until power was seized by the transitional government with the backing of the military in January 2007, the Awami League tended to follow a secular line, while the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) stood up for a more Islamic orientation of the state.

Hinduism as a force that generates political identity, its influence already restricted to just a few countries, has suffered major setbacks with the voting out of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at national level in India and the decline of the monarchy in Nepal.

In parts of South Asia efforts are being made to legitimise government democratically through more institutionalised participation than in the past or, as in India, to widen the legitimization base through the expansion of democratic procedures at subnational levels. In India elections are held regularly, even under difficult security conditions. Sri Lanka's ruling forces derive their legitimization partly from elections and partly from the position they adopt in conflicts between the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim sections of the population. While the rebel movement known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) claims to be the sole representative

in the area under its influence and asserts this claim by repressive means, Sinhalese politicians are often remarkable for decidedly clientelist practices.

Monopoly of power: still largely to be achieved

Almost all countries of South Asia – the exception being the Maldives – are having great difficulty gaining the monopoly of power in their territory. Many processes of nation-building, partly influenced by frontiers and power set-ups inherited from colonial times, have remained inconclusive. In large areas of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sri Lanka the state has little or no authority. In Nepal Maoist rebels gained control in many rural districts during their uprising from 1996 to 2006. In parts of rural India, especially in the North-East, the state is not in control of the security situation everywhere.

There are many non-state armed groups (NSAGs), differing widely in their goals, membership, level of organisation and willingness to engage in dialogue. The spectrum ranges from underground militant Islamists in Afghanistan and Pakistan, through Maoist rebels with ideological aims in India and Nepal, to separatist groups in North-East India and Sri Lanka. The transition to criminal activities is often fluid. It is exceptional, however, for governments or security services to make use of NSAGs in neighbouring countries, as Pakistan has used militant Islamist groups in Kashmir. In contrast to parts of Africa and Latin America, the exploitation of expensive raw materials as a resource base does not play an important role for South Asian NSAGs, opium in Afghanistan being an exception – albeit a significant one.

Conflicts in South Asia often have cross-frontier implications. The LTTE's struggle in Sri Lanka does not leave the Tamil population in India and thus Indian politics unaffected. The success or failure of the Maoists in Nepal will also have an impact on India. The question of pacification in Afghanistan and Pakistan concerns not only the region itself but also the security situation in other parts of the world.

Besides inappropriate policy and unequal socioeconomic development, the existence of ethnic, regional and religious social division lines contributes to the inability of states to gain the monopoly of power. Ethnic heterogeneity in South Asia is not, however, a cause per se: it is often instrumentalised in conflicts.

State institutions: reforms in some areas

The success of macroeconomic regulation confirms that some parts of the state machinery in South Asia exert their tasks efficiently. Reforms do not usually extend on a comparable scale to the performance of other core state functions, such as guaranteeing the rule of law, security and welfare. This increases the danger that certain groups may attempt to push their causes through by violent means. The authority and effective-

ness of government action are, moreover, restricted by the abuse of office for the widespread self-enrichment of elites. Some South Asian countries are particular victims of corruption: four of the eight ranked in the bottom third of Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index 2007.

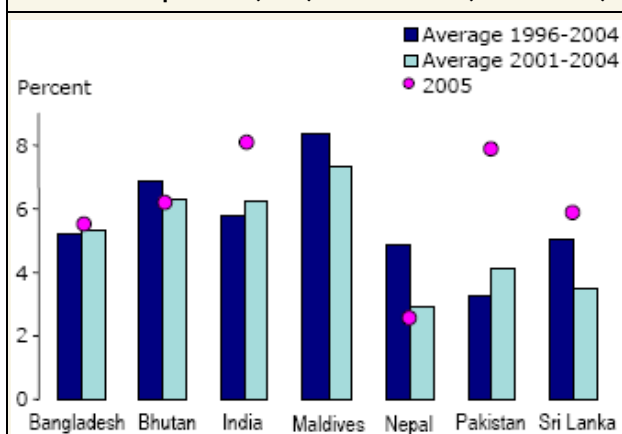
The form taken by government institutions, the separation of powers, the structure of the state and the degree to which subsidiarity is accepted are subjects of profound debate and power struggles in all the South Asian countries except India, with its established structures. Clear trends for the region as a whole are difficult to identify. In most countries – Afghanistan and Bhutan being special cases – some of the preconditions for a functioning separation of powers in terms of institutional capacities and the backing of society already exist. Parts of the judicial system, not least supreme courts, enjoy a degree of independence and, from time to time, stress their claim to monitor the executive's compliance with the norms of the rule of law. On the other hand, the position of the national parliaments, again with the exception of India, is weak compared to that of the executive. The work of government institutions is also impaired by the fact that the purpose primarily served by many parties is to safeguard the interests of those in power, of specific elites or their leaders. The function of pooling the ideas and concerns of broad sections of the population and of resolving conflicts of objectives and interests in a regulated contest is not adequately fulfilled. There is a lack of democracy within parties. The huge influence wielded by certain political dynasties is a conspicuous problem in South Asia.

Approaches to decentralisation, which form part of political programmes everywhere except the Maldives, usually consist only in the delegation of some administrative functions, often tend to be declaratory in nature or are implemented with no great determination. The exception is again India, whose federal system and decentralised structures have been expanded further. Given the ethnic, religious and regional variety of their countries, what governments fear most is that decentralisation may smooth the path for centrifugal forces or even secessionist endeavours.

Policies and service delivery: potential not fully tapped

Data on growth, foreign debts and foreign exchange reserves show that governments are most likely to meet the need for reform in the macroeconomic sphere. According to the World Bank, growth in Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka averaged over 5 per cent from 1996 to 2004 (see Figure 2). This created greater scope for public welfare and providing for the future. In its 2006 projection *Can South Asia End Poverty within a Generation?* the World Bank felt that poverty could be overcome in the foreseeable future.

Figure 2: Annual growth rates of gross domestic product (GDP) in South Asia (1996–2004)



Source: World Development Indicators / World Bank 2006

The additional income generated by the growing economies are of no more than limited benefit to the general population. The Asian Development Bank has detected a sharp increase in economic and social inequality not least in South Asian countries in the 1990s/2000s. Underdevelopment is also evident from the 2007 Human Development Index (HDI), which covers 177 countries. With the exception of Sri Lanka and the Maldives, the South Asian countries rank between 126th place (India) and 135th (Bangladesh). The trends are upward, towards improvement. State social security systems are still rudimentary or – as in Sri Lanka – do not predominantly serve the population groups in greatest need. In India many of the rural poor await a material dividend from democracy. Budget spending on health and education is low; in social policy India is not a leading power.

However, the ability of governmental and non-governmental organisations to take action in acute emergencies has improved appreciably. This is demonstrated, for example, by India's reactions to the tsunami and by Bangladesh's to its frequent flood disasters. The threat of widespread famine seems to be removed.

A negative example of the neglect of the education system is provided by Pakistan, its shortage of skilled workers being an obstacle to better economic development. According to the 2007 World Development Report, a total of some 400 million young people between the ages of 12 and 24 – or about 30 per cent of all young people in developing countries – live in the region. This makes for prospects and potential, provided the shortcomings in education and training are successfully addressed.

The countries of South Asia are not yet adequately equipped to protect and preserve the environment and natural resources. In addition, the availability of water and agricultural land is threatened by climate change.

The mountain regions of the Hindu Kush and Himalayas, whose environmental systems and resources are very important for the densely populated plains downriver, are particularly vulnerable in ecological terms. Although governments and societies are becoming increasingly aware of the need to adapt the use of ecosystems, industry and infrastructure and to take precautions, not enough is being done to enforce newly introduced legislation on the environment. For cross-frontier policies and measures, like those being debated in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), more political will and the expansion of operationally active institutions are needed.

Good macroeconomic management, which, besides political guidelines, calls for no more than a few qualified experts in selected central government organisations, has largely gained acceptance in South Asia. On the other hand, requirements of social adjustment and provision for the future confront the capacities of the state – and the political will of its leaders – with more complex tasks, which they have performed with varying degrees of success, but on the whole not to the extent which could have been achieved.

3. Role of external actors

Four sets of reasons for external actors to bring influence to bear in South Asia can be identified: first, achieving greater stability and containing security risks; second, interest in closer cooperation with growing economies in the region; third, South Asia's relevance to the global environment, including the consequences of climate change; and fourth, the fact that some partners' priorities are determined by the goals of democratic transformation and good governance.

The options open to external actors wanting to contribute to the resolution of violent conflicts are limited. Few of them are willing and able carefully to coordinate the use of policy and development instruments and to enter into a long-term commitment. Afghanistan, Pakistan and the links to the global threat of terrorism are attracting the closest attention. The antagonism between the two nuclear powers India and Pakistan runs deep and can hardly be alleviated from outside. As a global player and regional power, India confidently emphasises its independence in determining its political agenda. Given the numerous lines of conflict in Pakistan's case, external partners are scarcely able to arrive

at shared assessments of the situation, let alone exert coordinated and effective pressure for conflict resolution and better governance. For the USA security policy interests clearly take precedence. Other actors, including the EU Member States, rely on development cooperation and policy dialogues to promote longer-term processes of transformation towards democracy, the rule of law and social adjustment. The varied nature of government structures and the usually open, pluralist societies of South Asia provides openings for contacts with reform forces and for their promotion, not least outside the framework of direct government cooperation.



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