

DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURE OF INDIA AND OTHER ASIAN COUNTRIES

Dr. Rajeev

ABSTRACT

India is the seventh largest (by area) and the second most populous country in the world, with roughly one-sixth of its population, of about a billion and a quarter. India is one of the world's oldest civilizations, yet a very young nation. Under Mughal and Rajput control for much of its history until its colonisation by European powers in the mid-eighteenth century. The world's largest democracy by electorate was created after independence in 1947 under the leadership of its nationalist movement, the Indian National Congress. Elections to its Parliament are held once every 5 years. India is a constitutional republic governed under the world's longest written constitution, federally consisting of 29 states and seven centrally administered union territories, with New Delhi as the nation's capital. In this paper, the democratic structure of India as well as neighboring asian countries are analyzed.

PREAMBLE

The country has six main national parties: the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP), Indian National Congress (INC), Communist Party of India (CPI), Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). At the level of its states,

many regional parties stand for elections to state legislatures, every five years. The Rajya Sabha elections are held every 6 years

India is a Sovereign, Socialist, Secular, Democratic, Republic. Sovereign means an independent nation. Socialist implies social and economic equality for all Indian citizens. This guarantees equal opportunity and equal social status. The government attempts to reduce economic inequality by reducing concentration of wealth. Secular implies freedom to choose your religion. The state gives every citizen the right to practice and propagate a religion of his choice, and also right to reject all religions. The state treats all religions as equal and there is no official state religion. Democratic means the government is a democratically elected, head of the government (Prime Minister) is elected by the people. Republic means head of the state (President) is not hereditary King or Queen but indirectly elected by the people.

FACTORS AFFECTING DEMOCRACY

Factors such as education, corruption, women's issues, student politics, leadership strategies and the design of political institutions affect national and local politics.^[3] Some other factors such as the caste issue, environment policy, new long-term investment in the economy by foreigners etc., also have a bearing.

Democracy is a form of government in which people are governed by their own elected representatives. It is a government of the people, for the people and by the people. In this system of government, it is the people who are supreme and sovereign. They control the government. They are free to elect a government of their own choice. Freedom of choice is the core of democracy.

Democracy existed in ancient Greek and Roman republics but with little success. It had very little scope in ancient India. Democracy entered its golden stage in the twentieth century. Many countries in the world today follow the democratic form of government. Democracy depends on the following conditions (i) co-existence of ideas and of parties; (ii) the right to free discussion; (iii) universal adult suffrage; and (iv) periodic elections.

India is the largest democracy in the world. The Constitution of India was enforced on 26 January, 1950. It ushered in the age of democracy. India became a democratic republic infused with the spirit of justice, liberty, equality and fraternity. The Preamble, the Directive Principles of State Policy and the Fundamental Rights reflect the Indian ideology as well as the caste, creed, religion, property, or sex have the right to cast their vote. After an election, the majority party or coalition forms the government and its leader becomes the Prime Minister.

Political parties are the vehicles of ideas. Parties act as the bridge between social thought and political decision in democracy. The Indian politics system is a multiparty system. However, gradually politics has become a game of opportunism and corruption. Most political parties are only interested in coming to power. Every party adopts different caste politics. Some try to influence the people through caste politics. Some try to raise the religious sentiments of the people. The Indian ideology today is replaced by caste and religion.

We enjoy every right in theory, but not in practice. Real democracy will come into being only when the masses are awakened and take part in the economic and political life of the country. There is inequality in every sphere- social, economic and political. Illiteracy is the main cause of inequality. The illiterate masses get easily lured by money during such an event. Also some of our legislators have criminal records against them. The people who make the laws themselves break them.

Even after more than sixty years of Independence, one fourth of the population today goes to bed with an empty stomach, live below the poverty line without access to safe and clean drinking water, sanitation or proper health facilities. Governments have come and gone, politics have been framed and implemented, crores of rupees have been spent, yet many people are still struggling for existence.

Casteism today is more pronounced than it even was. Untouchability remains abolished only in theory with frequent newspapers reports of Dalits being denied entry to temples or other public places. Violence has been taken a serious turn in country, Bandhs, strikes and terrorist activities have become a common affair. Every sphere of national life is corrupted. Our democracy is capitalistic. Here, the rich exploit the poor who have no voice or share in the democratic structure. For a successful democracy, all these need to be checked.

But India, as a democratic country, has progressed in many aspects. It has achieved self-sufficiency in food grains as a result of the green revolution. People vote for change whenever a government fails to come up to the expectations of the people. India has been a successful democratic country only because the people are law-abiding, self-disciplined and have the sense of social and moral responsibilities.

For a democracy to be fully successful, the electorate should be literate and politically conscious. They should be fully aware of their rights and privileges. The illiterate masses of India should be given education so that they can sensibly vote for the right leaders. The U.S.A, Britain, Germany and Japan are successful democratic countries and have progressed in every sphere because the masses are literate.

There should be quality in every sphere of life. The politicians should also respect the true spirit of democracy. They should refrain from corruption caste and communal politics. The citizens should elect leaders with good moral values and integrity. People should be guided to choose their representatives. They should not be influenced by anyone in this respect. Individuals should learn tolerance and compromise and understand that freedom is not unbridled but dependent on not harming another individual's well being.

Democracy demands from the common man a certain level of ability and character, like rational conducts, an intelligent understanding of public affair, independent justice and unselfish devotion to public interest. People should not allow communalism, separatism, casteism, terrorism, etc to raise their heads. They are a threat to democracy. The government, the NGOs and the people together should work collectively for the economic development of the nation. Changes should come through peaceful, democratic and constitutional means. The talented youth of today should be politically educated so that they can become effective leaders of tomorrow.

DEMOCRATIC STATES

- Bangladesh - generally considered a liberal democracy with free and fair elections.
- Bhutan - a state that has recently made the transition from an absolute monarchy to a liberal democracy with a constitutional monarch.
- Cambodia - a liberal democracy under a constitutional monarchy.
- India - the world's most populous democracy since independence.
- Indonesia - a republic with a presidential system of rule.
- Iraq - holds a democratic constitution and has held regular elections since the downfall of Saddam Hussein.
- Japan - a parliamentary representative democratic monarchy, with the Emperor holding only nominal power.

- Lebanon - a parliamentary democracy following the cedar revolution.
- Kazakhstan - a presidential republic with a bicameral legislature.
- South Korea
- Malaysia
- Maldives
- Mongolia - a parliamentary republic.
- Nepal- a recently established republic following the overthrow of the monarchy.
- Pakistan - a semi-presidential federal democratic republic.
- Philippines
- Singapore - parliamentary republic.
- Sri Lanka
- Timor-Leste
- Turkey - a parliamentary representative democrac.

QUASI-DEMOCRACIES

- Bahrain - a constitutional monarchy with a strongly democratic constitution, although the prime minister and government ministers are elected by the King. In terms of human rights, Bahrain is considered a model for the middle east, albeit not having institutionalised yet a system reaching the standads of a liberal democracy.
- Georgia - a country that, following the Rose Revolution, instituted a system of democracy, though is still criticized by some observers as having features of authoritarianism and high levels of mistrust between the govenrment and opposition.
- Israel - since independence, the state has held regular elections within a democratic framework. However, a large proportion of the population is under military occupation with no democratic rights.

- Jordan - a constitutional monarchy with a representative parliament and power vested in the King.
- Kuwait - holds the oldest directly elected parliament among the Arab States functioning under the executive authority of a hereditary emir.
- Thailand - a state with a tradition of democracy, which however has been recently disrupted by internal disturbances
- Turkmenistan - following many years of being ruled under a heavy-handed dictatorship, the state recently passed democratic reforms.
- Yemen - a presidential-republic with a bicameral legislature. Recent elections were deemed by observers as "partly free" with certain incidents of violence and repression of media.

NOMINAL OR QUESTIONABLY DEMOCRATIC STATES

- Afghanistan - recently held an election. However, the election was widely considered to have been rigged in favour of the incumbent.
- Armenia - while the state has the trappings of democracy, such as universal suffrage, the adequacy of conduct of elections has been questioned by international observers since 1995.
- Azerbaijan - holds regular elections and has a democratic Constitution, however, elections are widely considered flawed and there are a record of human rights abuses within the state.
- Iran - holds many features of democracy, such as the election of a President. However, the highest executive authority in Iran lies with the supreme leader. Recent elections were widely considered to have been rigged in favour of the incumbent.
- Kyrgyzstan - constitutionally democratic republic. However, 2003 election following unrest was marred by irregularities.

- Russia
- Tajikstan - officially a parliamentary republic, though elections are widely believed to be corrupt.
- Uzbekistan - constitutionally democratic, but elections are considered not to be to the standards of a liberal democracy and the country has a record of human rights abuses.

NON-DEMOCRATIC STATES

- Brunei - the system of government is a sultanate, meaning that the executive authority lies with the unelected sultan.
- China - an authoritarian state under one-party rule.
- Laos - a communist single party state.
- Myanmar
- North Korea
- Oman - ruled by a hereditary sultan with an advisory council elected on universal suffrage, however, no political parties are legal and no opposition movement.
- Qatar - ruled by hereditary emirates
- Saudi Arabia
- Syria
- United Arab Emirates - ruled by hereditary emirates
- Vietnam - communist single-party state

Japan is the most democratic nation in Asia, according to a report published by the World Democracy Audit. The organisation ranks nations on how they fare in terms of granting political rights, civil liberties and press freedom. The world's second largest economy fared well in the fields of political rights and civil liberties, but lagged behind in press freedom.

India is considered to be one of the most corrupt nations of the world, where the malice of corruption is deeply embedded in all three arms of the government -- the bureaucracy, the judiciary and the legislature.

Pakistan has been rattled by a series of suicide attacks by home-grown militants, who have now turned against their creators. It has also faced intense pressure from its so-called ally -- the United States -- to take stricter steps against these militants, even at the cost of civilian lives. To make matters worse, Pakistan always seems to totter on the precipice of dictatorship, thanks to its history of long spells of military rule interspersed by the reign of weak civilian governments.

The Communist nation China has been repeatedly criticised by Western nations and the United States for its controversial human rights record. Those who question the government, its policies or objectives often find themselves behind bars, mostly for completely ludicrous charges. China also keeps its press under a tight control, and fares at an abysmal 138th position in the field of press freedom. The nation barely has any independent media publications, and news is disseminated by state-run dailies which pursue their own agendas.

The Chinese government also keeps a hawk's eye on books, magazines and newsletters to ensure that no incriminating material contradicting the government's propaganda sees the light of day. The authorities have also attracted scorn for trying to censor Google searches, social networking sites and other websites.

Torn apart by its bloody history and bloodier present, Afghanistan's attempts to hobble back to democracy have been rocky. The civilian government, led by the unpredictable Hamid Karzai, is made up of warlords who are trying to regain their turfs.

Among the 150 nations on the list, Afghanistan ranks at no. 148 due to the devastating levels of corruption rampant in the administration. It scores woefully low in terms of granting political rights and civil liberties to its citizens.

The elections held in August 2009, which ensured Karzai's return to power, were highly controversial as it was alleged that it had been rigged by the President and his militiamen.

At the 121st slot, Afghanistan also fares poorly in terms of press freedom. According to a recent study, it is one of the most dangerous places for journalists, due to the many cases of murders of international correspondents in the country.

Myanmar is the least democratic nation on earth according to the organisation. For the last 20 years, the country has been ruled by the ruthless military regime of the junta, which has crushed any attempts by the opposition parties to reintroduce democracy.

The citizens of Myanmar have no political rights or civil liberties whatsoever. Along with an inconsiderate junta regime, the people of Myanmar also have to put up with extremely high levels of corruption, as most privileges are usurped by the military leaders and their cronies. Bowing down to intense international pressure and the threat of severe sanctions, Myanmar has agreed to hold elections soon, though the United Nations has already expressed doubts about whether the elections will be fair and legitimate.

In a nutshell, here's the challenge: making sense of these four countries within the framework of tonight's lecture, the State of Democracy in Asia:

- Until last summer, Burma ranked among the world's least free countries, with thousands of political prisoners, a military government, armed insurgency, a controlled press, and

battered opposition. Today, in a surprising change of course, Burma appears set to shed its authoritarian past and pariah status.

- In 1980, Sri Lanka was one of only three “free” countries in Asia, with an educated population, strong economy and abundance of natural resources, including a strategic location along important shipping lanes. Despite these natural advantages and its early start on the path to democracy, this is how the International Crisis Group describes Sri Lanka today: “Nearly three years since declaring victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the government has weakened democratic institutions, deepened ethnic polarisation and aggravated the country's long-standing impunity for human rights violations. The former war zones in the north and east are heavily militarised and controlled from Colombo, while disappearances, killings, torture, gender-based violence and other abuses continue with impunity throughout the island. Sri Lankans who speak out about the situation risk reprisal.”
- Without question, North Korea is the world’s least free country. This is how Ambassadors Abramowitz and Bosworth describe it, “We start with North Korea, a country without even a whiff of democracy and little individual freedom, because it raises urgent problems of war, nuclear terrorism, and the risk of nuclear proliferation in Northeast Asia.”
- Finally, what role, if any, is there for Asia’s democracies to play in consolidating and strengthening democracy in the region? The mere fact that a meeting of this nature was hosted by the South Koreans, initiated by the Mongolians and featured Indonesians speaks clearly about the state of and potential for democracy in Asia.

ECONOMIC GROWTH - Across the region, but particularly in Southeast and East Asia, more and more countries are reaching the status of middle income, if not rich, countries. As these economies continue to grow, as they did in Taiwan and South Korea, and more and more people enter the middle class, it is likely to lead to an increase in personal freedom – travel, information, association, etc. – as well as demands for democracy or, more modestly, political inclusion. As of today, the most glaring exception to this trend is Singapore, where income, educational and informational levels would suggest that the country should have transitioned to democracy decades ago. In 2010, Singapore’s GDP per capita was over \$40,000, close to the United States’ and greater than France’s.

RAPID URBANIZATION, THE GROWTH OF MEGACITIES, AND DEMOGRAPHICS

- Across Asia, the rate of urbanization and the rise of megacities across the region have been phenomenal. There are now 15 cities in Asia with populations over 9,000,000. Seven of the ten largest cities in the world are in Asia. Although a number of these cities – Tokyo, Kolkata, Shanghai, and Mumbai – were among the world’s largest cities in 1950, by 2025 of the 30 largest cities in the world, nine of the Asian cities on the list will be relative new comers. Among these are Karachi (population 19 million), Dhaka (population 21 million), Manila (population 15 million), Jakarta (population 11 million), and Shenzhen (population 11 million). In 1950, not a single one of them had a population in excess of 1,500,000 people. Moreover, in 12 countries, including China, Korea, Indonesia, and the Philippines, over 40 percent of the population now lives in urban areas. By 2050, according to UN estimates, the only two Asian countries where the urban population will remain under 45 percent are Cambodia and Sri Lanka. And 75 percent of the countries will have urban populations over 60 percent, including seven countries which will have urban populations in excess of 80 percent. With the rise of large urban areas, not only do old patronage and village-based relationships break down, but citizens begin to enjoy a much greater degree of personal freedom and autonomy; have better access to information; are exposed

to diversity in all of its complexity; and slowly gain entry into the middle class. As Professors Yu and Dingding note, in China, “The opening up and the rapid rise of urbanization have created a new set of reference points, and people increasingly take a secure lifestyle for granted, seeing education, medical care, and decent housing as welfare entitlements.”

INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY - With only a few exceptions – North Korea and Burma – Asia as a whole is now wired. There are over 500,000,000 internet users in China; Indonesia has more Facebook users than any other country other than the US; and over 50 percent of the populations in Malaysia, Singapore and Korea use the Internet. Even in Vietnam, internet usage is approaching 30 percent. Cell phone usage is also increasingly common, even in low income countries. In the wealthier countries, cell phones are universal. Over half of the population now owns a cell phone in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Pakistan, China, India, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam. Unlike in the US or Europe where this technological revolution was built upon a well-established communications infrastructure, in all but a few countries in Asia, citizens went from having little to no access to communication technology to being a part of the information revolution in one decade. Despite their best attempts to limit or control information and to restrict ownership of information communication technology, not even Burma or North Korea are immune to these global forces. In Burma, although less than one percentage of the population has access to the internet, this translates into 500,000 users, most of who live in cities and are relatively well-educated. In North Korea, citizens living near the China border can now access Chinese mobile phone signals and despite the lack of access to satellite TV or the internet, more and more North Koreans own computers, DVD players and TVs, allowing them to watch or read contraband information smuggled into the country on thumb drives or DVDs. North Korea also recently invited in an Egyptian cell phone provider to build a network there, suggesting plans to expand the mobile phone market. This phenomenon has given rise to something now referred to as “Liberation Technology.” For

very obvious reasons, the advent and spread of ICT has also spawned an equally robust effort on behalf of governments, not just authoritarian governments, to monitor and police the internet. In China, the government spends more than any other government to police the internet, including the use of 50,000 internet censors and sophisticated monitoring software. In Thailand, once seen as Southeast Asia's freest country, the government has embarked on a wide-scale effort to censor the internet, often hiding under the country's draconian lèse majesté laws. In the past two years, it has blocked thousands of websites and prosecuted people for the dissemination of information or opinions online, including the high-profile case of Jiew, the director of a popular online news magazine, Prachathai. Jiew was charged under the intermediary liability section of Thailand's 2007 Computer Crime Act, as well as for the crime of "Lèse Majesté," which has often been used in Thailand to enforce censorship.

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Senior Director Brian Joseph