

Roundtable on the State of Democracy in South Asia

Regal Room, Lalit Hotel (New Delhi, India)

March 22, 2015 / 2pm~6pm



Moderator: Anselmo LEE, Co-Convener, ADN

Panelists

- 1) **Afghanistan**, Manizha Wafeq, Executive Board, Afghan Women's Network (AWN)
- 2) **Bangladesh**, Badiul Majumdar, SHUJAN
- 3) **India**, Henri Tiphagne, Co-convener, India Working Group on Human Rights
- 4) **Bhutan**, Chimi Dorji, Deputy Speaker, National Assembly
- 5) **Maldives**, Ibrahim Ismail, Chairman / College Council, Mandhu College Maldives
- 6) **Nepal**, Sushil Pyakurel, Chairperson, Alliance for Social Dialogue
- 7) **Pakistan**, Samson Salamat, Director, Center for Human Rights Education
- 8) **Sri Lanka**, Prabath Sudarshana Wickramasinghe, Executive Director, Rights Now
- 9) **South Asia**, Netra Timsina, People's SAARC and Rakhi Sehgal, Coordinator, People's SAARC India Country Process

The diversity of culture, understanding, and geography in itself poses challenges to solidarity within the Asian region. The Asia Democracy Network (ADN) strives to close this gap through continuous inter-regional dialogue and collaboration between the various sub-regions. On April 22, 2015 in New Delhi, India, ADN organized the State of Democracy in South Asia round table inviting prominent activists and scholars from the seven countries that comprise the South Asian region, Bhutan, Maldives, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The panelists were requested to speak about the challenges to participatory democracy in their respective countries as well as highlight the possible opportunities that may strengthen democracy.

In Afghanistan, a lack of democracy education has created resistance for the plight for democracy in the country. The misconceptions of democracy being an outside concept with its vague technical terminology have made people skeptical. Importantly, corruption with the institutions keeps democracy from progressing. Religious extremism, discrimination, marginalization of groups exists in parliament, creating laws that are not inclusive.



Bangladesh has a dysfunctional democratic system, characterized by manipulating elections, lack of rule of law, systematic violation of human rights, creeping control over the media, shrinking space for dissent and weak institutions. Endemic corruption and a culture of impunity provide incentives stolen elections. Good governance is a far cry in Bangladesh.

In India, the society suffers from the prevalence of the sense of communalism which attacks minorities. The percentage of minorities in its parliament have come to the lowest. Also the ruling party often makes religious comments which may provoke the minorities and may lead to violence in the worst case.

In Bhutan being a very new democracy, is confronted by severe challenges due to lack of people's participation, voter education, and of capacity building democratic institutions. Moreover, lack of female representatives, only three among the entire forty-seven, shows the lack of women's voices in society.

According to the Maldivian advocate, its democracy is now in jeopardy due to the absence of legal protection, of rule of law, of legal representation, and cultural factors such as political corruption.

Nepal is a small country with a 30 million population. However, it has over 100 ethnic groups representing themselves in the parliament without any one group taking the majority position. It lingers Nepal's transition from weak political institutions and namely democratic institutions without the public's trust toward rule of law.

Pakistan also faces four challenges. Its constitution does not provide equal political representation and equal citizenship. Frequent and severe conflicts caused by religious extremists, fundamentalists, and military forces pose another challenge to Pakistan. Even the elected government performed relatively poorly and tends not to respond to the public's demand. Last but not least, the Pakistani community is suffering from military control of civil government. Despite the fact that the government is elected, thus civil, it still lies under the power of military forces. This causes human rights problems and limits the range of freedom.

South Asia as a whole presents common problems such as lack of rule, rise of impunity, human rights abuses, weakening of democratic institutions and shrinkage of CSO space. Different forms of conflicts caused by minority problems or religious extremism are taking place across South Asia. To understand these challenges, it is required to ponder upon the role of capitalism, multinational corporations, state power, and the role of the economic and political elites. It was also addressed that the growing social economic inequality in general and the continuous poverty has a great impact on the challenges.



Opportunities and Responses for Participatory Democracy in South Asia

With a general understanding of the challenges to democracy and human rights in South Asia. The roundtable had a discussion to identify opportunities and ways to overcome the challenges. The core issues are rule of law, accountability, violence or extremism, and women. The main question we need to ponder upon shall be the necessity of networks. The question requires us to delve into several issues it gave birth to. The issues shall include potential

benefits a stronger organization of a network and what it can bring to the world. It is important to strengthen democratic organizations bringing a democratic community to act in an organized way to promote democracy. At the end, these issues bring us back to the very first question of the necessity of the network; it leads us to think. What does the network bring to these aforementioned issues?

If Asian countries successfully adopt and structure democracy, the ownership of the democracy must come from Asian countries themselves. How to maintain this principle within the complicated international relations is also one that is needed to think about. Last but not least, some of Asian countries are suffering from religious conflicts, especially from groups of religious fundamentalists. As these conflicts are obstacles to a healthy democracy it demands us to ponder upon the way to address it while building democracy and a strong network in South Asia.

In Afghanistan, a system called Jerga has been serving as a form of democratic practice. In the system of Jerga, people discuss religious issues and vote for decisions on certain issues. Although Jerga was originally patriarchal, it has become more inclusive for women. Taking Jerga as an example it was recommended to the international community that it needs to embrace historical and traditional perspectives when building participatory democracy. According to the advocate, Afghanistan is making progress on several fields; its civil society and media are getting stronger, making the public more responsive to the leaders; as more and more education is provided, its literacy rate has been increasing. Furthermore, its parliament is on its way to approve the bill enabling the public to access the information, especially those from the government.

In Pakistan, new opportunities can be expected as new political forces emerged as electoral democracy took place. As a result, the public began talking about the linkage between democracy and human rights. Its vibrant civil society and media are also in the same line with the aforementioned changes; civil society's responses have been supportive of democracy. Nevertheless, risks and threats toward people working for human rights and democracy has still remained. The best option they have to decrease the risks is to form alliances with others, both individuals and groups. Thus, building alliances should be one of the top priorities for Pakistan society. A recommendation is that the Pakistani society pursues a strong social movement based on the human rights-approach to development, not an individual project-based approach.

In Maldives, the society has made considerable progress beyond what the official government has done. One characteristic of Maldives' democratic progress is that its democracy activities tend to mainly focus on political rights. In that sense, its society should shed more light on individual rights. Besides the progress currently taking place, Maldives has more potential. Firstly, the rapid developing communication technology can promote the public's rights to information, precipitating more responsive democracy. Secondly, Maldives is a very young country and the young generation is the majority of the country. In other words, it has much more potential in developing participatory democracy than other countries in which certain forms of democracy or regime have already been established. Recent turmoil with the greatest number of participation supported such potential.

In Nepal, social movements, local democracy, and elections has been developing as well as the freedom of media. Although the government censorship on media has not ceased, Nepal now has alternative form of media on online.

In India, local governments are incorporating more and more of the public's participation into their judicial systems. Previously excluded groups such as regional or religious minorities are getting more and more integrated into existing Indian society. As civil society began monitoring elections and roles of political parties, elections have become comparatively more free and fairer than before. Social movements or protests, especially those with non-violent characteristic, began taking place while a considerable number of human rights institutions were founded. Such activists often use social media.

Sri Lanka is currently in democratic transition. Nevertheless, it is faced by both of its government and public lack of experience in participatory democracy. The key for Sri Lanka is to figure out how to make use of its national institutions for democracy.

Bhutan is currently in the infant stage of democracy. It has only been seven years since Bhutan became democratic. Although Bhutan has to synchronize a significant number of laws it passed under the monarchy, its future is still bright. One figure that makes such expectation is that many international, Chief Security Officers (CSO) will come into Bhutan to educate its people.

Bangladesh also sees opportunities as the level of public awareness has increased over time. Since the nation's economy is recovering, greater demand for freedom and democratic government due to economic growth can be expected. All of these combined present positive signals for the future of democracy in Bangladesh.

As for the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), several recommendations have been made to improve the current progress. Thematic working groups among different South Asian countries on the issues of common interest can be formed. Issues of minority rights, trade, investment climate change, labor, migration and refugee can be some of the areas the countries can work together. Promoting rights to information- citizens' rights to demand needed information to government and force the government to respond- can be another issue. To address these thematic working groups can be formed. These people-to-people and nation-to-nation cooperation is extremely crucial.

How to bring Asian voice into South Asian efforts?

Mr. Kaustuv Bandyopadhyay, Executive Director of PRIA ADN Steering Committee Member highlights the importance of social movements especially those run by the public themselves. The current situation of India can be a good example showing the significance of people's engagement. In India, demands of political party reforms have been increasing. Despite such aspirations, the public's actual participation with political society is still inadequate. CSOs regularly involved in political society are inexistent and only one organization engage with parliamentary process;

Mr. Tur-Od Lkhagvajav, President & Co-founder of Transparency Mongolia shed a light on ambivalent situations. According to him, the increased use of social media promotes democracy. On the other hand, social media is also used as government's tool to strengthen its control. Mass media has become more vibrant in many South Asian countries. At the same time, the media also has become polarized. Although is true that we face some of these aforementioned challenges, we can still find hopes from public's increased demand on women' rights local rights, the fact that people learn from each other's positive experiences and the potential e-governance has on democratic development.

Mr. Samson Salamat, urges the necessity of identifying some countries in need of special intervention such as a special mission to Pakistan which assessed the nation's situations. Nevertheless, the advocates also address some of the challenges CS has in Pakistani community; there has been a continuous emotional gap between local people and CS. This gap needs to be decreased and social movement can be a good way to do so.

Recommendations

There were underlying similarities in the struggles to maintain democracy in the South Asian countries. The increasing lack of rule of law, weakening of institutions, and corruption within the region has threatened democracy. The rise of impunity, lack of rule of law and deteriorating human rights has the common denominator of regimes suppressing marginalized groups giving root to the deterioration of democracy in South Asia. Democracy will thrive when the government is inclusive and participation of all people is prioritized.

- Raise international awareness on the increasing religious extremism, ethnic conflict, marginalization, and discrimination in South Asia to expose governments, regimes, and militant groups utilizing this to suppress the people.
- Increase democracy education to raise public awareness and understanding of participatory democracy.
- Increase capacity building programs to empower the people to mobilize for their rights.
- Promote more sub-regional solidarity to create a united front to overcome common challenges in the sub-region.
- Increased international collaboration to display solidarity on the struggles in South Asia.