

Reflections on the State of Democratic Transition Process in South Asia: a Vanguard Role of Elites Critical to the Consolidation Process

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South Asia has a wide range of experience with democracy. While India's democracy has proved resilient and exemplary, the foundations for democratic governance in other countries in the region are still fragile. The 1999 coup in Pakistan derailed the country's experiment with democracy since 1988. With the success of the April 2006 movement, Nepal recently started another attempt at transition to democracy- a process disrupted by the May 2002 dismissal of the national parliament by King Gyanendra. The varying level of success of different South Asian countries with democratic governance offers rich contexts to learn about the dynamics of democratic transition and consolidation. Dwelling on the experiences of India, Nepal and Pakistan, this paper focused on the role of elite cooperation or conflict in the process of democratic transition and/or consolidation. The main thesis underlying this paper is that the role of national elites (defined broadly as leaders and activists) is central to understanding democratization process in a developing country like Nepal. The paper argues that the absence of factors that are considered preconditions for the success of democracy such as higher level of income, liberal values and tolerant culture is somehow compensated by the vanguard role of elites if they learn to cooperate with each other to build and sustain democratic order.

Elite interaction is therefore a key element to understanding the democratic transition and consolidation process. The findings from the South Asian cases also support the emphasis of more recent democratization literature on interactions among key political actors as an important variable in understanding the success or failure of democratization process (Bratton and van de Walle, 1994 p.454). Repeated failure of democratization efforts in Pakistan and relatively higher level of success of this process in India and Nepal is explained in terms of the degree of what Bermeo calls elite willingness to "compromise or bargain and abide by the outcome of the democratic game." As Bermeo observes, democracies are "recreated piece by piece, institution by institution, and the creators are usually old enemies." In the context of South Asian elite interaction, Lijphart's thesis that "consociationalism is possible only when elites understand the perils of political fragmentation"

stands very well vindicated (Bermeo, 1992). Studies from Latin America and Southern Europe have compared the consequences of elite settlements with “social revolutions” and underlined the need for more scholarly attention to this phenomenon. In the case of both India and Nepal, elite cooperation has had such revolutionary impact in transforming the political landscape and the absence of such cooperation explains the limited progress in Pakistan. The role of elite cooperation also differentiates unconsolidated from consolidated democracies with the absence of elite consensual unity” appearing as a major hurdle (Burton et al. 1992). What Cohen calls “deep suspicion between moderate sides of each other’s intentions,” appears very explanatory of many of the challenges confronted by democracies and/or movements for democratic reforms in India, Nepal and Pakistan (Cohen, 1994). The paper finds the concept of shared stake in democratic systems by the elites as a powerful factor determining the degree and speed of possibilities of cooperation or compromise in all the three cases considered.

References

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