

Issues of Democracy In Developing Countries

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Abstract

Democracy is that form of government where the wish and the will of the citizens, of its people prevail. It is the only government in which equality, justice and liberty are guaranteed to every citizen irrespective of caste, colour, creed, region or religion. This is possible only because the supreme power, sovereignty rests with the people of the State. But because of the huge population in every developing country, people's will does prevail but the will is exercised through their elected representatives. The latter are accountable and answerable to the people who elect them. Democracy has a long and rich history and has been interpreted differently over the ages. But whatever the times, democracy has a huge fan following. Presently, democracy means a government in which people participate voluntarily and have a say in the governance of their country. But democracy has to face many challenges to find a firm footing in the developing countries. This paper is a modest attempt to present the various issues in a democracy in developing countries.

Democracy, unlike any other government, guarantees many rights: the right of free speech, freedom of religion, freedom to form political parties, freedom to dissent and criticize among others. The list of rights that a democracy guarantees is inexhaustible. Democracy promotes the interests of the common people far better than any other government. The biggest merit of a democratic government is that the electorate has the right to show the door to their elected representatives, if the latter neglect the people who have spiraled them to the prestigious office. It is the duty of the representatives to promote the interests of the greatest number of people. The government has to be very efficient in a democracy because of the responsibility of running the State that the people have reposed on their firm shoulders. Democracy helps in heralding a peaceful change. The ballot, democracy ardently believes, has more power than the bullet. Democracy has the power to plead, persuade and participate. Democracy encourages deliberation, discussion and debate. Democracy is also a great balancer for it endeavours to balance a cross-section of people. It offers ample opportunities to everybody assuring a life of dignity for all the individuals.

But democracy can deliver the desired results only when certain conditions are met. The electorate needs to be alert and conscious of its rights as well as its duties. Running a State is like a partnership between the people and the government where both the parties are equal stakeholders. Both the parties have to be responsible stakeholders. The political parties and the various pressure groups that are manifestations of the individual should take their role very seriously. Democracy entered the Asian and African countries, only after the Second World War. Though democracy was a late entrant in these countries yet the determination of the people of these countries to herald in democracy in their respective countries was praiseworthy. Yet, the journey of democracy in the developing countries has not been without hiccups.

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Indonesia faced chaotic years from 1949 to 1966 under President Soekarno, the country's first President who suppressed parliamentary institutions in favour of an authoritarian guided democracy. President Suharto rose during this turmoil and became the second President of Indonesia for thirty one years, ruling as a dictator. After his fall in 1998 the Reformation in Indonesia is helping the country limp back to democracy but the challenges have been many. The stooges of the past dictators who amassed great wealth and power are trying hard for the democratic process to derail. Corruption, trolls by fanatic groups, violation of human rights and misuse of the social media to propagate negative news are major challenges to democracy in Indonesia. Bangladesh is another country which has opted for democracy many times. The Army in Bangladesh is a formidable foe of democracy. The generals of the army have tasted power and want to continue to maintain their hold on the political system by hook or crook. Democracy in Bangladesh has seen a tumultuous journey where leaders have been jailed, imprisoned and silenced. Yet the fight for democracy continues with people ready to sacrifice their all to welcome democracy for their future generations. Pakistan defies all definitions of democracy. A Muslim country, a theocratic State that was formed on the basis of religion, Pakistan is in a bad shape because of the various internal warring groups. There is infighting among the various regional sect groups. The Army's over-powering presence only complicates the situation. The election process takes place but is soon replaced by rule by the Army which finds a pretext to topple the legally elected government. Afghanistan, a once upon a time resource-rich country is in wreck in the present times because of the interference of the external powers in the recent past. The country, unfortunately, is in the midst of a civil war. Peace has eluded the nation as some tribes of Afghanistan are fighting amongst each other as well as against the US forces. The country is in a no-win situation with democracy being the greatest causality. The Taliban led forces are another deterrent to the whole idea of democracy

Myanmar/Burma has been under the control of military generals for a very long time. Aung San Syu Kyi has struggled to restore democracy in her country – Burma. She led the movement from the front and her movement was non-violent. The military backed Union Solidarity and Development Party won the 2010 elections which were criticized for being manipulated. Aung San Syu Kyi was released from house arrest in 2010 and won a landslide victory in 2015. But she did nothing to stop the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingyas Muslims for which she has been isolated and criticized by the world community. As a State Counselor she has not been able to promote equality in her Country. Democracy does not encourage killings or discrimination of any kind.

Bhutan lives peacefully as a State stressing more on Gross National Happiness and setting an example for other countries. With the King as the head of the country, the people are satisfied with the political system for King Jigme Wanchuk welcomed people's participation in 1998 by voluntarily curtailing the powers of an absolute monarch. He chose to abdicate in favour of his son, Jigme Khesar Wanchuk. By introducing a new Constitution, Bhutan is a constitutional monarchy with parliamentary democracy. Nepal, the only Hindu kingdom in the world has witnessed turbulent times since the last century. King Birender gave introduced democratic institutions in 1998 into his country on the demand of the people of the Country but his younger brother Gyander, became the King, after the former's tragic assassination in 2001. King Gyander assumed power after his brother's death to wipe away all the democratic institutions in 2005. The people of Nepal took to the streets and King Gyander was forced to hand over powers to a seven party alliance in 2006. With the adoption of the new Constitution, Nepal has to accept the dissent of the Madheshis or the hill people. The country is trying to accommodate every citizen. Such an endeavour augurs well for the

democratic process. Sri Lanka, an island country, was ravaged by a civil war in the last century. Development suffered and the country saw a civil war of the worst kind. The Liberation of Tamil Tiger's Eelam (LTTE) fought for the rights of the Tamilians who felt that they were being discriminated against. It is only recently that peace has been restored in the country to the south of India. Unrest in any one corner of Asia would lead to democracy being endangered in the entire region. 'India, South Asia's largest and most diverse country, has displayed greater resistance in terms of economic performance, democratic rule and socio-political stability, but other countries in the same region, such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal, have been adversely affected by internal conflicts leading to diverse negative outcomes. A persisting challenge for these countries is how to achieve economic development, nurture good governance and overcome social and political conflict.' It is also important to recognise the fact that South Asian countries have not evolved in isolation of each other but have continued to be influenced by historical, socio-cultural political and economic forces often speaking across geographical and national boundaries'.

The issues of democracy among the Asian countries are many. One of the main issues of democracy is corruption that has infested all these countries. With Independence in these countries, a small elite took birth that has since then clung to power. This small elite while holding on to the reins of power has grown richer. The people of the respective countries have noticed the increasing corruption in the day to day life of the common man. The elite has become more aloof and arrogant while hoarding wealth. The elite class has indulged in dynasty rule passing on power to their next generation. We have the example of the Gandhi family in India, the Badal family in Punjab, the Chautala family in Haryana, the Abdullah family in Kashmir etc. This dynastic rule is a great challenge to democracy for democracy means rule of the common people and to give everybody a chance. 'The elites in India have fine-tuned the culture of evasion and repressions. We see efforts all the time to solve people's problems through bureaucratic and technical means. It is only under intense pressure of popular movements and agitations that limited political recognition as agents is acknowledged vis-à-vis the people'. This phenomenon of dynastic rule is rampant in the other countries too. In Bangladesh, in the recent past, the Awami League with its President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was stopped from taking office after elections even though the party had won a majority in the 1970 elections. Since then democracy has suffered set backs. In a military coup Lt. Gen. Ziaur Rahman assumed power in 1977. He was later assassinated in 1981 and Lt. Gen. Hossain Mohammad Ershad gained power in 1982 and he ruled till December 1990. The tussle for power continues between Sheikh Hasina, one of Mujib's surviving daughter who is the leader of the Awami League and Khaleda Zia, widow of former ruler, Lt. Gen. Ziaur Rahman. The military again stepped in on the pretext of cleaning the system in 2007 but elections have been conducted since then and Awami League won in January 2009. The masses see corruption being practiced by their leaders who also amass wealth. The ostentatious show of wealth by this small elite is a trend-setter for the masses to indulge in corruption. Casting one's vote is a very serious responsibility. Poverty is another obstacle in the way of democracy which cannot fructify till poverty is eliminated or at least mitigated. Continuous efforts have to be made to eradicate poverty. A majority of the Asian countries have a substantial number of people whose basic needs are not fulfilled. This feeling of deprivation doesn't augur well for any democracy. With an increasing population, the various programmes to eradicate poverty become points of failure. This leads to other problems like lack of water, hoarding, black-marketing and unequal distribution of resources. The resources do not reach everybody so there are pockets of abject under development and poverty. 'Water-hungry cash crops like sugarcane take over the command areas of irrigation projects, according to Roy, leaving farmers in these areas forced to

produce crops for cash at the expense of food consumption'. This leads to stagnation in agriculture. Agriculture is in a bad state which leads to problems like hunger, starvation, malnutrition and a general feeling of deprivation. These problems lead to instability in the region. The first problem is that of wealth being unevenly distributed and the second problem is that of the people being exploited. This encourages the people to take up arms against the State. Such armed revolutions bleed a country to ruins. It leads to damaging of property, loss of lives and an extra burden on the State. Development works also suffer. Another challenge of democracy in these countries is lack of social services that make the people feel neglected. Social services are necessary because they are the basic need of the weak, the old and the very vulnerable.

Improving the education level of the people is also very important for democracy to be successful. The education imparted has to be secular in this age of migration, where an increasing number of people are moving across regions for various purposes. Secular education becomes a necessity because of the dangerous growth of terrorism worldwide. For democracy to flourish there has to be a halt to abuse of any kind of human rights. There is gross violation of human rights in many countries which makes people whose rights are violated averse to the State. Resources have to be managed in these countries. Caste, region and religion play a very important role in deciding one's participation but resources are distributed according to the vote-bank. The State should play its role as a mature balancer but, unfortunately, it does not. Tensions because of region, religion or caste are obstacles for democracy.

Use of money or muscle power goes against the values of democracy. Yet they are used liberally. All tricks are tried to vitiate the election process. Elections are life-line of democracy for they reflect the mandate of the people in very clear terms. Yet, this process is tampered with. Fraudulent methods are used to win elections. The voice from the margins need to be heard, otherwise separatist struggles would increase. The tribals who are present in every country and those in minority need to be included in the democratic process. We have to move towards establishing substantive and real democracy in all these countries. 'Substantive democracy refers to the existence of citizens as 'active agents capable of pursuing their interests with a measure of autonomy from entrenched structures of dominance and privilege'. The idea of a Police state or that of establishing a dictatorship of any kind needs to be discouraged. Democracy means a very healthy environment which has the capacity to bring out the best in the people. It helps people to blossom because their dignity is intact and respected. In all these countries efforts should be made to mitigate the problems, which may be economic, political or social so that people continue to have faith in democracy and its various institutions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can contend that the issues facing a few developing countries are quite similar. Poverty is one of the main issues for when the basic needs of people are not satisfied they would have little interest in participating in the democratic process. Poverty rises because of increase in population and also because of the mismanagement of resources. These countries are rich in resources yet, unfortunately the latter are not tapped properly. They are either wasted or are in the hands of a few elites who are not ready to part with the excess they own. The leaders of these countries are not selfless. The leaders do not inspire. They are corrupt and are more attracted to power, status and pelf. The entry of military into the political arena is another blunder. Military coups are to be discouraged. It is easy to call the armed forces to the streets but very difficult to send it back to its barracks once they have tasted naked power. Health facilities and education need to be improved as

these are basic needs of the people. The feeling of deprivation, discrimination and exploitation have to end for they create a very volatile environment where strife and hatred rule.

The marginalized people, women, children, the weak and the vulnerable have to be tended to. The media has to play a very mature role. It has to learn how to criticize logically and rationally. Discrimination of every kind has to end because it is a direct blow to a person's dignity as well as self-respect. People should be vigilant so that they can give a mature verdict during the elections, when they are called upon to cast their vote. There has to be a clear separation of powers between the Legislature, Executive and the Judiciary for they are the pillars of democracy. Only when we readdress all these issues can democracy gain ground in these countries. Democracy is a blessing. Its fruits have to be relished and they can be relished only when certain conditions are available. A few developing countries have enjoyed the first wave of democracy and have laid the foundation for deepening of democracy. In the next step they need to build a sturdy building over the foundation of democracy, a building that would be able to weather all storms. The people of the developing countries who managed to wrest independence from the colonial powers and set themselves on the path of democracy need to be applauded for their love for democracy. There has been humungous effort from the people to safeguard democracy. The lack of will from the various governments needs to be tackled. It is with the co-operation and united efforts of the people and the State that democracy can brush aside all the obstacles and establish itself firmly in the various countries. The developing countries need the smooth functioning of democracy to prosper and progress.

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¹ Hettige Siri and Gerarz Eva (eds.), 2015 *Governance, Conflict and Development in South Asia*, Perspectives from India, Nepal and Sri Lanka, Sage, New Delhi, p. 2.

² A. Shourie, 'India and its Neighbours', in T.T. Young (ed.), *Challenges of Economic Growth, Inequality and Conflict in South Asia*, New Jersey, World Scientific: 1-22.

³ Javed Alam, 'What is Happening Inside Indian Democracy?' in *India's Democracy, Meaning and Practices*, Vora Rajendra and Palshikar, Suhas, 2004, New Delhi, Sage, p. 95.

⁴ Gail Omvedt, *Struggle Against Dams or Struggle for Water? Environmental Movement and the State*, Vora and Palshikar, op.cit.n 3, p. 410.

⁵ Suhas Palshikar, *Whose Democracy are we Talking About? Hegemony and Democracy in India*, Vora and Palshikar, op. cit. n.3, p. 130.