

South Asia: The Struggle for a Democratic Order

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South Asian states, during the last one year, have witnessed an interesting phase of developments, which is essentially rooted in the struggle for the realization of democratic rights in these countries. A deeper analysis of the events, particularly during the last one year, indicate that these states are undergoing a process which would ultimately culminate in strengthening democratic institutions and federal principles. The intensity and level of popular assertion may vary from one state to another, but the objective remains the same. Moreover, this theme is going to dominate South Asian societies in the years to come.

The Indian Scene

In India, the 13 parties United Front (UF) coalition government fell after the withdrawal of support to it by the Congress party. The fall of the government was precipitated by the report of the Jain Commission which had been constituted to look into the circumstances leading to the assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Mr. Rajiv Gandhi, and fixing the responsibility, if any, on the part of the then government in providing the protection to the former Prime Minister. The Congress party argued that since Jain Commission had indicted the Dravida Munitra Kazagham (DMK) party of Tamil Nadu, which was a partner in United Front government, it had to be dumped, failing which it could not continue with its support to the government. But the UF strongly defended its coalition partner DMK and refused to oblige the Congress. During its rule of almost two years, the UF had to face this situation for the second time. Earlier it had to drop its Prime Minister, Mr. Deve Gowda under pressure from Congress Party. This time, the UF government could not take it anymore and decided to call it a day and quit the government. Thus, this development led to the dissolution of Parliament and announcement of fresh elections.

The Coalition Rule

The Congress party, gearing up for the elections scheduled to be held in February 1998 is projecting the agenda of stability. A subtle whispering campaign against coalition form of governance has been launched which is aimed at restricting the widening scope of federalism in the country. But the social and political realities indicate that Indian political system has already entered the phase of coalition rule and it has been accepted and recognised by the society as a legitimate and effective form of governance. In view of multicultural, multi-religious, multi-lingual and pluri-regional character of Indian state and society, the public mind is increasingly coming to believe that coalition form of governance can provide greater stability to the country. Ironically, the Congress party is not ruling out coalition with *like minded parties* in the governance of the country.

It is equally important to note that the political developments in India, during the last one year, have prodded the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to revise its political agenda. The party, known for its strong right wing centrist rhetoric, is no more talking about Hindutva, and the abrogation of Article 370 (which gives special status to Jammu and Kashmir) etc. The BJP is trying to reach out to the minorities, particularly the Muslims. The BJP ideologue, Mr. Jagmohan, recently clarified that Article 370 of Indian Constitution should not be abrogated without the consent of the people of Jammu and Kashmir. The BJP is also approaching the regional parties to forge an effective coalition partnership. It is not even averse to the idea of coalition with regional parties, which demand greater devolution of power; one should keep it in mind that the party's partnership with Akali Dal in Punjab has been working smoothly for the past two years.

In all probability, the next government, which is expected to be installed by March 1998, will again be a coalition government. In a healthy turn of events, the issues of caste and community are not now dominating the main political agenda of the parties. The economic issues are dominating the political agenda instead.

Democracy in Pakistan

In Pakistan, the political developments during the close of the year signalled the creating of a situation, which put a question mark on the survival of democracy in that country. In the final analysis, it becomes clear now that the apparent tussle between the judiciary and executive owed its origin to the brazen attempts at manipulating the democratic institutions, which the political parties had been struggling to build for the last fifty years, right since the creation of Pakistan. The restoring of infamous 8th Amendment, which gave the President of Pakistan the unbridled powers to dismiss a civilian government, and which the Nawaz Sharief government had ventured to do away with through a constitutional amendment, on the part of then Chief Justice Mr. Sajjad Ali Shah let the cat out of bag. That the President was using the judiciary to arrogate back unto himself the powers of making a democratically elected government subservient to him became too obvious. It seems that President was banking on the support of another traditional power centre, the Army. If one goes by its past activities, the Army in Pakistan has been unabashedly playing the role of a destroyer of democratic institutions ensuring the rule of dictators, from Ayub Khan to Zia-ul-Haq. However, this time, the Army remained neutral, which forced the President Mr. Farooq Leghari to resign.

The economic situation in Pakistan has been dismally portrayed by international monetary agencies. Moreover, there is a growing demand from the provinces, particularly from Sindh and Baluchistan for greater share in the regional revenue allocations, which is adding a new dimension to the otherwise shattered and dismal economic situation of the country. There is an equally growing demand for greater federalism and more powers to the states. The Nawaz Sharief government has, no doubt, been saved, thanks to the position taken by the Army. However, the democratic institutions continue to remain feeble in Pakistan. The masses in Pakistan, given the grinding poverty and illiteracy they have to pass through, are yet to be provided with the opportunities of participation in the true spirit of democracy. This has prompted the power centres in Pakistan to use the traditional Islamic card to divert the attention of the people from the real issues.

Bangladesh Portents

Bangladesh, having witnessed a long spell of army dictatorship, will have to go a long way in assimilating the democratic values that would ensure smooth functioning of democratic institutions in the state. The present Sheikh Hasina's government is struggling hard to set the stone rolling in the right direction. The opposition political parties, whose main plank has been the resolve of Islamizing the Bangladesh society and polity, have realised that this agenda cannot take them too far. The country is facing the crises of rising government debts, failing public sector industries, bureaucratic inefficiency and rising crime rate. Against this backdrop, the opposition parties have now raised a new issue of '*Save the Country, Save the Economy*'. This is a healthy development. The economic conditions in Bangladesh are a minefield, which can provide an opportunity to those countries, which are competing, for markets in the South Asia to use Bangladesh for their strategic interests.

Nepal

Nepal has seen rise and fall of several governments during the last few years. In this game of musical chairs, accommodating different factions of political parties has been the major preoccupation of the ruling political groupings rather than addressing the real issues facing the people. In Nepal 50% of labor force continues to remain without work. Defections and pulling down of the governments has been a favourite pastime of politicians, ever since democratic system was introduced by the King, after a prolonged struggle for democracy in this small Himalayan Kingdom.

Conclusion

Democracy is more a state of mind than a body of doctrines. The system of democratic governance that most of the South Asian countries borrowed from the West has displayed enormous elasticity in adopting to the societies in South Asia, fraught with divisions on the lines of castes, tribes, communities, ethnic groups, regions etc. The appeals of primordial sentiments inherent in such social configurations run counter to the spirit of democracy. Yet it goes to the credit of the democratic form of governance that it has diluted the traditional loyalties and pulled people out of the dungeons of primordial orthodoxy mainstream. Thus we see the formation of new social groupings all around us ready to fight for their rights. The critics say that such assertion of rights has been devoid of the pledge to discharge the duties in the true spirit of democracy. One can only say this much in defence of democracy that the critics are becoming a little too impatient, and one hopes that it would not be too long before the societies in South Asia develop the right attitude for democracy to function successfully.

The South Asian states will enter the new year with many unresolved issues from the previous year. The trends indicate that the relations between the South Asian states may improve further. At least India has stood firm on the resolve that SAARC Countries can overcome their problems through dialogue without third party interventions. We can very well see the positive reciprocating gestures from other states in the region, including Pakistan, to India's offers of friendship. So far as interstate relations are concerned the situation is improving remarkably and if the SAARC efforts

succeed in setting up a co-operative economic block (SAPTA) in the near future, this will have tremendous impact on the economy of the South Asian states. Thus we might be standing at the threshold of a great revolution in South Asia. As about the future, as the year 1997 draws to a close, one can only say it costs nothing to be an optimist.