The Age of Democracy and Reason—Can South Asia Find Lasting Peace?

By Probal DasGupta

Around 2005, South Asia was a patchwork of two dictatorships, two monarchies, and three democracies—including one engaged in a civil war. Eight years later, the region boasts six countries with democratically elected governments, while the lone dictatorial regime lumbers its way toward democracy. So, is a region with a reputation for producing a mélange of autocratic governments, strife-torn states, and monarchies, undergoing a political catharsis?

In a historical first, six countries in the region have gone, or will go, to polls between 2013 to 2015. Unexpected things have happened: Pakistan underwent a democratic process to elect a government, Bhutan transitioned from monarchy to democracy, Nepal and Bangladesh brace themselves for acrimonious elections, India yearns for better governance, and Myanmar moves fitfully toward a more democratic system.

Most of these countries are still transitioning from being authoritarian states to newly formed pluralistic societies with shared problems of unrest, uncertainty, and violence. In this context, the occurrence of elections in this region is like a silent revolution that promises positive change, political multilateralism, and social inclusivity. Whether governments can enforce peace in the region, however, will depend on their capacity to engage with other states in the neighborhood to achieve common goals.

Take the example of Bangladesh. Ten years ago, Bangladesh was dubbed the world’s jihadi capital with fledgling terror camps in the country that aided insurgent organizations in northeastern India and Pakistan. Over the last five years, the current Awami League government in Dhaka clamped down on clandestine terrorist camps. This facilitated the dismantling of major insurgent groups in India that fed off these camps, primarily the United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa).

For its part, Indian intelligence helped Bangladesh nip a Hizb ut-Tahrir-supported coup bid against the Dhaka government in 2012.¹ Such actions increased mutual trust, translating into both increased cross-border trade and $7–$9 billion worth of direct

Probal DasGupta specializes on investment and political risks in South Asia and works as an Associate Director (South Asia) for Control Risks—a global political and business risks firm. Mr. DasGupta holds a master’s degree in international affairs (MIA) from Columbia University in New York.
Indian investment in power and road infrastructure in this region—a move which could further isolate insurgent groups that have been trying to win local support.

In Myanmar, the changing political landscape raises hopes of free and fair elections in 2015 and it increases confidence among neighbors and investors. A people’s government would have greater public approval in addressing internal strife in Kachin and could help prevent the exploitation of recent Buddhist-Muslim religious riots by Lashkar-e-Taiba and al-Qaeda.

As a new democracy, Nepal is trying to achieve political stability. Having flirted with monarchy and violent communist upheavals, the country’s politicians have now been consolidating ties with the government in Delhi. Increased information sharing between the two countries led to the arrest in Nepal of Yasin Bhatkal, a notorious terrorist wanted for multiple attacks in India. In return, India provided logistical assistance and training to the Nepal administration before the November 2013 elections. Both nations have begun to see explicit value in bilateral cooperation on security issues.

The optimism in the eastern part of South Asia is mostly absent in its western part. The government in Pakistan relies on the support of radicalized sections of the Pakistani army and remains vulnerable to the surge of extremist elements. President Nawaz Sharif, upon his reelection in June of this year, raised hopes of reinitiating dialogue with India, relegating the more contentious issues to the backburner. Despite the overtone, major strikes in September by infiltrators in Indian Kashmir derailed talks between the two countries and punctured Sharif’s credibility.

The inability of national leaders such as Imran Khan to condemn the Taliban for its attack on child activist Malala Yusufzai reveals the Pakistani government’s total lack of control over the country’s radical elements. The Pakistani government will need to show more resolve and decisiveness to face internal and external threats and reorganize its internal political power equations to establish preeminence of the elected civilian government over the intelligence services and the army. A more credible internal authority will help the government fruitfully engage with the governments of India and Afghanistan. President Sharif’s appointment of a new army chief is a step in that direction. India goes to the polls in 2014, and the recent remarks of its ruling party and opposition leaders, coupled with President Sharif’s promises, indicate a possible opening for dialogue. How India and Pakistan deal with the withdrawal of Allied forces from Afghanistan in 2014 and the increased likelihood of infiltrations and terrorist strikes in India, however, remains a standing question.

The upcoming elections—including the one in Afghanistan in 2014—provide opportunities for states to elect and empower their governments. Empowered governments are able to exercise better internal controls and engage each other more credibly. As the smaller nations in eastern South Asia—Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar—have moved in that direction, whether the region’s larger nations follow suit remains to be seen.

– Mads Neumann served as the Lead Editor for this op-ed.
NOTES

4 Deccan Herald, “Tunda, Bhatkal were arrested in Nepal,” August 30, 2013, <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/354266/tunda-bhatkal-were-arrested-nepal.html> (accessed October 20, 2013).