

**Department of Political Science
University of Jammu, Jammu**

Concept Note of National Seminar on

State of Democracy in South Asia

March 6-7, 2019

Origin of liberal democracy in the South Asia can be traced back to the colonial era, however, the South Asian States moderately redefined liberal democracy in their respective national settings in the Post-Colonial period. South Asian States' political transition from Colonial to Post-Colonial State in the mid of twentieth century, in itself was the outcome of their strong urge for democracy which was manifested in their anti-colonial struggles. Notwithstanding this, democracy as an idea, process and institution have been alien to their societies. Some of them have been successful whereas the others have suffered from various road blocks in sustaining formal democracy however all of them are still far away from establishing substantive democracy. Bhutan's experience of political transition from absolute to constitutional monarchy and liberal democracy has been successful whereas Nepal's experience of political change initially from Ranacarcy to democracy and latter on from absolute monarchy to democracy and republic has been quite problematic. Likewise Bangladesh's transition from praetorian rule to democracy has been a success but Pakistan has suffered various ups and downs in that. Although, Maldives had made a political transition from authoritarian republic to democratic republic in 2008, however its transition has not been smooth and free from the problems.

India has been able to sustain liberal democracy with a brief interruption of emergency from 1975-1977 wherein the quasi federal system has turned out to be quite handy in its consolidation. Further, India succeeded in establishing grass root democracy through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments. Notwithstanding the aberration of emergency during 1975-1977, India has successfully ensured the peaceful transfer of power from outgoing government to newly elected government. It has evolved and passed through the various stages ranging from the politics of ideas to the politics of identities. Indian democracy has grown from first generation to third generation of human rights. Liberal democracy got enriched when India enacted the Right to National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (2005), the Right to Information Act (2005), the Right to Education Act (2009) and the Right to Food Security Act (2013). Although, Indian democracy has travelled several milestones but it is also not free from problems. The prevailing political violence in its periphery and Maoist affected states indicates that all is not well with the health of liberal democracy. Further increasing reliance on the coercive state apparatus like army and paramilitary forces speaks volume about the state of Indian democracy which was expected to consolidate consent as a vital base of liberal democracy. However, this trend has not been confined to India alone the other South Asian States have been more intensely suffering from this tendency.

Though, Sri Lanka has been able to sustain procedural democracy but the issues pertaining to democratic politics have not been addressed so far. Further, Sri Lankan democracy assumed majoritarian character right in the beginning which led to the exclusion of Tamil minority and thereby the rise of Tamil Ethno-nationalism that was followed by political violence. Like other South Asian States, Sri Lanka's attempt to identify democracy with the rule of majority has further undermined the very core of liberal democracy. Political developments unfolded after constitutional coup from October 26, 2018 onwards, further indicates that the interests of ruling elites prevailed over that of nation and

masses, however, the role played by the opposition led by Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and the judiciary saved day for democracy in the Island nation. To save democracy, following constitutional coup wherein President Maithripala Sirisena removed Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and appointed Mahinda Rajapaksa as Prime Minister as part of his personnel electoral calculation, the Speaker of Parliament, Karu Jayasuriya stood his ground for democracy. Subsequently, when the issue of appointing a Tamil or a Sinhala as an opposition leader came, it appears that Jayasuriya threw out of the window the best practices of democracy. Speaker's decision to make Mahinda Rajapaksa the Leader of Opposition by unseating R. Sampanthan from that position was not only legally and morally wrong but also indicates the tyranny of majority has become the idiom politics which has been a serious threat to democracy in the Island nation.

Maldives' decade long (2008-2018) march towards democracy has been full of troubles. In its first multi-party Presidential election in 2008, Nasheed led the race but could not manage the fifty per cent plus one mark. He teamed with the rest of opposition to win in the second round but he was forced to resign in February 2012 which bothered the nascent democracy in Maldives. Abdulla Yameen came to power through a controversial run-off to the Presidential election in 2013 but he systematically seized control of all democratic institutions, threw almost all the opposition politicians in jail or forced them into exile, created fear in their minds including that of his own legislators by jailing Vice President, Ahmed Adeen. Although, the victory of Ibrahim Mohamed Solih in the Presidential election held on September 23, 2018, has been considered the victory of democratic forces in the Island nation but the challenges confronting the liberal democracy in Maldives are still formidable.

Monarchy as a traditional political structure continuously bothered democracy quite a lot in Nepal till it was abolished in 2008. Nepal started its march in this direction alongwith India, Pakistan & Sri Lanka and made successful transition from *Ranacracy* to liberal democracy in the early 1950s, however, its march got interrupted in the early 1960s when King Mahendra revived absolute monarchy which ruled Nepal till 1990. Nepal witnessed the *Jan Andolan-1* which succeeded in reviving the liberal democracy and transformed absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy in 1990. Liberal democracy could not change the power equation in Nepalese society which created ground for the rise of Maoist Movement in the mid 1990s that ultimately culminated into *Jan Andolan-II* in April 2006. It was followed by the comprehensive democratic transition from: monarchy to republic; Hindu kingdom to secular state, unitary to federal state apart from reviving liberal democracy however the nature of federalism and issues of *Madhesi* and *Jan Jatis* are yet to be settled.

Bhutan's democracy has been youngest in the South Asia as it has made transition from absolute monarchy to democracy in 2008. After Nepal, Bhutan has been the only South Asian State that has been experimenting democracy with constitutional monarchy. Nepal's experience of democracy with constitutional monarchy turned out to be sour whereas Bhutan's experience has been pleasant because it has qualified constitutional monarchy by providing inbuilt mechanism of checks and balances on the authority of monarch in its constitution. Further, its constitution has provided arrangement for the decentralization of powers which has always been the thrust of democracy. Bhutan has marched ahead of other South Asian States by providing a provision in its constitution that the opposition party shall play constructive role and ensure that the ruling party shall function according to the major provisions of the constitution, provide good governance and strive to promote national interest. The opposition party shall not allow party interests to prevail over the national interest and its duty is to ensure responsible, accountable and transparent government. Moot question is that whether it has been translated at the operational level but one thing has proved that the people of Bhutan has not given mandate to any political party for second time till date. In 2013 and 2018 general elections, they discovered new alternatives and voted the ruling party out of power.

Praetorian structures troubled Parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh apart from the other traditional social and economic structures like other South Asian States. Bangladesh has been successful in handling praetorian threat but its democracy has been found deficient on count of democratic and inclusive politics, and distributive justice like other South Asian States. Further, the democracy as a process has still been facing the crisis of legitimacy. Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its Islamist allies boycotted the elections held on January 5, 2014 but they contested recently concluded 11th general elections on December 30, 2018. Awami League (AL) led grand alliance *Mohajote* registered a landslide victory by winning 288 seats however the scale of victory caused huge embarrassment because of increasingly constrained electoral arena, the crackdown on civil liberty, the opposition and the media. Further over half a million security personnel were deployed on election duty to intimidate political opponents and giving a free run to AL activists at polling booths. Marginalization of opposition does not speak well about the health of liberal democracy in Bangladesh. Bangladesh's civil society and media have been sharply polarized vis-à-vis two streams of politics. Democracy does not only confine to holding elections at regular intervals. Democracy begins with elections does not end with it. Inclusiveness and empowerment constitute core and constitutionalism, secularism and pluralism are the life-lines of liberal democracy which have been facing rough weather in Bangladesh like other South Asian States.

Praetorian structures continued to trouble Parliamentary democracy in Pakistan in addition to the other structural impediments. Pakistan continued to be an interesting case of struggle between the democratic and praetorian forces as it had witnessed the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (1983), Alliance for Restoration of Democracy (2002) and a Civil Society Movement led by Lawyers in 2007 on the one hand and three long spells of praetorian rule from 1958-1971, 1977-1988 & 1999-2007 on the other. Civil society had played significant role to bring democratic change in Pakistan but its capacity to consolidate that change remained limited. Time and again, institutions of democracy in Pakistan were challenged by non-democratic interventions which culminated into the renewed civil society activism to restore democracy. Initially General Musharraf promoted civil society by providing enough political space to political parties, media, press, human rights groups and women but situation changed in November 2007 when Musharraf deposed Chief Justice, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry and declared an emergency and put him and other judges under house arrest. Again civil society consisted of lawyers, retired judges, school children, college students, academicians, teachers, human rights activists, and journalists asserted itself by courting arrest which ultimately dislodged General Musharraf from power. Civil Society Organizations (CSO) like Supreme Court Bar Association (SCRA), Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) and Human Rights Commission (HRC) of Pakistan played a prominent role in the civil society movement led by lawyers that resulted into the restoration of liberal democracy. Pakistan achieved another milestone in its journey towards democracy in 2013 when it was successful in transferring power peacefully from outgoing governments to newly elected governments in 2013 and 2018. Further, Pakistan has successfully conducted general elections in July 2018 and Pakistan's Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Party got relative majority and formed the government with the support of other political parties, however, it has been alleged that this has happened with the blessing of Rawalpindi Headquarter. Notwithstanding this, the results of July 2018 elections indicated that two most important families-the Sharifs and the Bhuttos found themselves in the political wilderness facing serious corruption charges. Further this electoral verdict has also put a full stop on the family rule in the democracy of Pakistan however it appears that the army has been a major anchor in its democracy.

An overview of South Asian states indicates that they have made a forward journey from praetorian rule and absolute monarchy to democracy. In comparison to the past, now all of them have been able to establish formal democracy as a system of governance. They have been successful in establishing

procedural democracy however it is still devoid of democratic politics. It has been an elite-centric process and people have yet to become the agenda of democracy in South Asia. Further, the centralized state system in South Asia has turned out to be a structural impediment and increasing reliance of state on the coercive state apparatus indicates the deteriorating health of democracy in the South Asia. Question of gender, minorities and underprivileged sections have turned out to be real time challenge for democracies in the South Asia. Reducing democracy to the rule of majority in the South Asia has undermined the basic principles of liberal democracy. Gender insensitivity has been posing a big question mark to democracy -as the power equation is still tilted towards male gender and the gender exclusion has been a phenomenon in South Asian States. In a globalized South Asia the logic of liberal democracy does not match with the logic of neo-liberal economy. To deliberate on South Asian States' experience of democracy, the Department of Political Science has planned to organize a two days National Seminar on the topic "**State of Democracy in South Asia**", on **March 6 -7, 2019**.

Sub-themes:

1. Neo-liberalism and Democracy in South Asia
2. Modern and Traditional Political Structures in South Asian States
3. Democracy and Dynastic Politics in the South Asian Region
4. Gender, Minority, Subaltern issues in Democracy in South Asia
5. Political Culture and Democracy in South Asian States
6. Civil Society and Democracy in South Asian Region
7. Coalition Politics, Secularism and Democracy in India
8. Praetorian Structures, Religion and Democracy in Pakistan and Bangladesh
10. Monarchy and Democracy in Nepal & Bhutan
11. Ethno-nationalism, Religion and Democracy in Sri Lanka
12. Gender, Minority, Subaltern issues in Democracy in South Asia
13. Democracy and Governance Deficit in South Asia
14. Democratic Deficit and State Security in South Asia
15. Demography and Democracy in South Asia