

South Asia

# Careless trashing of democratic norms: India joins the club

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**In South Asia, regimes are destroying democratic institutions to push illiberal ideologies.**

SOME decades ago, as an expatriate journalist in West Asia, I found the newsrooms from which the two leading English dailies of the region were published to be an ideological melting pot, an excellent index of the politics of South Asia. Most of the editorial staff came from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The majority might have come in search of greener pastures but a sizable number landed there seeking freedom from the repression and fear unleashed by illiberal governments back home.

The most vulnerable were Pakistani colleagues, veterans who had fled the regime of Gen Ziaul Haq, some after jail terms, while the Bangladeshi newsmen — there were no women from either of these countries — just had their first taste of military rule under Ziaur Rahman. If the Pakistanis were mourning the hanging of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and the death of democracy, the Bangladeshis, too, were similarly fearful of the future. Then there were the Sri Lankans who gave the impression that all was well in their society although a Tamil Muslim reporter among the majority Sinhalese didn't really concur with the narrative. It was the beginning of the 1980s and the first major attack by the Tamil Tigers was still a few years away.

The Indians were the smug ones, basking in the confidence of a robust democracy that had by and large stayed true to the Constitution of the secular republic and weathered the buffeting it had received from the internal Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi. With the system back on the rails, it was easy for Indians to look down on neighbours whose record on democracy was badly spotted. Not even the most astute of political analysts could have known that Mrs Gandhi's authoritarian sweep, however brief, would lay the foundations for the rise of the Hindu right and the current corrosion of the country's democratic institutions and systems.

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It's a systematic assault on practically every autonomous institution from the judiciary to the country's central bank and the top investigation agency. As the ruling BJP government led by Narendra Modi pushes to consolidate its hold over key institutions of governance as the next general looms close, it has thrown all democratic norms to the wind.

Never before has the country witnessed the careless trashing of democratic norms as when BJP president Amit Shah went on a rabble-rousing visit to Kerala. The Marxist-ruled state is in the midst of a law-and-order crisis as it does its best to implement a supreme court order on a fractious religious issue that the Hindu parties are whipping up. Shah has not only threatened to bring down the Kerala government for implementing the court order but has also upbraided the court for upholding women's rights. The apex court is under increasing attack from the BJP and its cohorts for

postponing a hearing on the contested Ram temple which the party wants built in Ayodhya before the 2019 elections.

As majoritarianism becomes the rule in declining democracies, it is usually the judiciary which is in the line of fire along with the opposition, media and civil society. In Pakistan it's no surprise that the government has capitulated to the Islamist parties which are inciting people to kill the judges who overturned the death sentence on Aasia Bibi for alleged blasphemy. As the streets swarm with supporters of religious hardliners baying for their blood, Prime Minister Imran Khan, after standing firm initially, has caved in with a "settlement" that bodes ill for the rule of law.

In the darkening political landscape of South Asia where the backsliding on democratic rule has been precipitous in recent months, the only bright spots appear to be Nepal which is trying out its newly minted secular constitution and Bhutan that is thriving on its unique "intertwining of the spiritual and the secular". For the rest, majoritarian regimes with little regard for the rights of minorities are running amok, destroying the core tenets of democracy as they harness religion to spread their communal poison and polarise societies. This is a familiar pattern across the region although of course there are national differences.

What all the ruling regimes are seeking is controlled democracies in which the media and civil society conform to their political ideology. It's no surprise that journalists, lawyers, academics and human rights activists have become the targets everywhere. If in India it is the trade unionist and highly regarded human rights lawyer Sudha Bhardwaj who has been arrested on trumped-up charges of being a Maoist, in Bangladesh it is Shahidul Alam, an internationally famous photographer and educator, who was picked up and tortured by the police for an interview in which he had been critical of Sheikh Hasina's government.

The politics of vengeance and attacks on opposition leaders is another feature of South Asia's downward spiral, both as a strategy to deflect from the shortcomings of the government as much as it reflects the intolerance of the political parties in power. This is perhaps most evident in Bangladesh where authoritarianism has been gaining momentum as the elections come closer. In February this year, former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party was jailed for five years on the charge of stealing orphanage funds. But just days ago, the Dhaka high court extended her term to 10 years in what appears to be a pre-emptive strike. A report in New Age said Khaleda's lawyers were not present during the verdict nor were the defence arguments heard.

But politicians and their parties no longer need the fig leaf of an election or due process to grab power as Sri Lanka has just shown us. A democratic coup can be organised just as effectively if the power centres are in cahoots. An NDTV interview has revealed how easily prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe was ousted by President Maithripala and Mahinda Rajapaksa put in office. There was no question of testing the strength of Wickremesinghe's party by the simple expedient of dissolving parliament at the same time. Rajapaksa's son has revealed that the president and the new prime minister had been in talks for months to bring "back political, economic and social stability".

If the 1980s newsroom were to come together now, the lingering sense of hope that kept it buoyant would be missing. And the Indians would no longer be cocky.

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