Democracy and South Asia

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2024 is considered to be election year globally, with at least 64 nations going into political transitions in this year. We will be looking into the elections of 3 South Asian nations which have an interconnected history, and similar dynamics but have evolved into interestingly contradicting political cultures. In the conclusion, we will attempt to compare overall trends of democracy in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India, with briefly discussing its reasons.

Bangladesh

Sheikh Hasina gained her fifth term as Bangladeshi prime minister on January 7th in an election whose outcome had been determined the moment

its schedule was revealed in early November, when the main opposition party boycotted the ballot. Instead of a political party, independent candidates won 63 seats, second only to Hasina's Awami League (AL), which won 222, making it difficult to form a parliamentary opposition. Almost all the victorious independent contestants were those who were rejected by the AL but were asked by the party leadership to appear as "dummy candidates" to give the election a competitive veneer before the world. These results were categorically rejected by BNP; AL's main competitor. BNP had preemptively boycotted elections as their demands of elections under a neutral caretaker setup were met with brute force by AL's government.

Pakistan

In Pakistan, elections were held on 8 Feb 2024. These elections were made controversial even before the polling day with credible allegations of pre-poll rigging on the prolonged caretaker set-up exceeding its constitutional limit of 3 months. The caretaker set-up in the largest province, Punjab lasted around a year. Prior to the elections, large-scale restrictions and censorships mainly were imposed targeting the opposition party PTI; led by former premier Imran Khan. Clashes following Khan's arrest led to over 10 thousand political prisoners including women and underage, few of which are facing trials in military courts. Despite this clampdown and internet shutdown on Election Day, to everyone's surprise, PTI-backed candidates got more seats than any other party. These results were unprecedented in a country where election results are highly influenced by its powerful military establishment. CNN called it the youth's rebuke to the military elite, WSJ stated it as voters' defiance to the military while Aljazeera coined it as a defeat of military-backed Nawaz. Ultimately, a hybrid government was formed, with key positions like finance and interior ministries under the establishment's control.

India

India's multiphase general elections are scheduled from April 19 to June 1. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, whose power is deeply entrenched, is seeking and expected to win a third term. During his decade in charge, he has positioned himself as a champion of India's growth, attempting to solve some of the fundamental flaws. However, his efforts to restructure India's secular democracy into a Hindu-first nation have exacerbated the country's vast religious and ethnic divisions. In these elections, the opposition mainly Congress led by Rahul Gandhi raised concerns over the possibility of EVMs being hacked and the government using enforcement agencies to coerce opposition members and like-minded business leaders. Although Mr Modi's efforts to consolidate power have undermined independent institutions, and the ruling party is perceived to have an unfair advantage

in the political arena, voting in India is still regarded as free and fair, and results are widely accepted by the candidates.

Why is South Asia slipping into authoritarian rules?

In South Asia, growing trends of authoritarianism, shrinking space for democracy and diversity, occasionally accompanied by military influence, can be understood well by dissecting common trends of socio-political cultures. Hypernationalism mixed with religious extremism and dynastic political parties is one of the major reasons for this political degradation. India, ruled by a far-right political party with a religiously motivated agenda, is slowly sinking into religious majoritarianism. On the other hand, Bangladesh under the grip of the Mujib family and Pakistan under the control of the Bhutto and Sharif families struggles to develop democratic polity. When leadership is inherited rather than earned, as a Chinese proverb says, fish rots from the top.

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