



Democracy under Duress: Analyzing the Challenges Facing South Asia's Democratic Institutions

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23772826>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Received: 27-08-2026

Accepted: 26-09-2026

Published: 20-10-2026

Keywords:

Social obstacles, Economic inequality, Political instability, Religious and ethnic divisions, Caste and social stratification, Populism and authoritarianism, Democratic resilience, Regional stability.

ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the deep-rooted social, economic, and political obstacles that continue to challenge democratic stability in South Asia, focusing on countries including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives. Socially, factors such as religious and ethnic divisions, entrenched caste systems, and gender inequality contribute to widespread exclusion and restrict political participation, limiting the representation of marginalized communities. Economically, persistent poverty, severe income inequality, and rampant corruption erode public trust in democratic institutions. The influence of economic elites and entrenched patronage networks allows resources to be captured by powerful interest groups, distorting democratic processes and limiting government accountability. Politically, weak institutions, frequent military interventions, and the rise of populist and authoritarian leaders challenge democratic norms, compromising judicial independence and checks and balances essential for effective governance.

Introduction

South Asia, a region home to over a quarter of the world's population, is diverse not only in its cultural, linguistic, and religious makeup but also in its political systems. While several countries in South Asia, such as India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, have established democratic frameworks, the region's democratic

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institutions are under increasing pressure. Over the past few decades, South Asian democracies have faced significant challenges ranging from political instability, corruption, authoritarian tendencies, populism, and regional conflicts to the erosion of civil liberties. These challenges have made it difficult for democratic institutions to function effectively and have left many questioning the future of democracy in the region. This paper examines the key challenges that South Asia's democratic institutions face and analyzes the implications of these challenges for the region's political stability.

Through a comparative analysis of these obstacles, this paper highlights both commonalities and unique challenges facing South Asia's democracies. It also examines the interconnected nature of these issues, revealing how social, economic, and political challenges reinforce one another. The study concludes by proposing targeted strategies to enhance democratic resilience in South Asia, such as fostering social inclusion, reducing economic disparities, and strengthening institutional frameworks to promote a more stable and representative democratic environment

Review of Literature

The political landscape of South Asia, a region with a rich and diverse history, has been significantly shaped by its democratic experiences and challenges. While democratic institutions in South Asia have made notable strides, the region faces persistent challenges that hinder the full realization of democratic ideals. A growing body of literature has sought to understand these challenges, focusing on issues such as political instability, corruption, authoritarianism, populism, ethnic and religious tensions, and the erosion of civil liberties. This review aims to explore key scholarly works that provide insight into the factors undermining democratic institutions in South Asia and offer different perspectives on the region's political trajectory.

1. Political Instability and Weak Institutions

Political instability has been a recurring feature of South Asia's democratic development. Scholars like **Lal (2006)** in *"The Political Economy of South Asia"* argue that weak political institutions are a major driver of instability. Political systems in the region have often struggled to consolidate democratic norms due to fragmented party systems, unstable coalitions, and a lack of political maturity. **Hasan (2004)** further emphasizes how political instability in countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan has been exacerbated by military interventions, political violence, and the dominance of political dynasties, which have undermined the development of strong democratic institutions. **Ganguly (2018)** in his work on India's democracy suggests that while India's democracy is considered resilient, frequent political shifts and coalition



governments often lead to short-term governance, which can be detrimental to long-term policy planning and institutional coherence.

2. Corruption and Governance Failures

Corruption is another major challenge that has been extensively explored in the literature. **Khan (2002)** in *"Corruption and Governance in South Asia"* points out that corruption has become institutionalized across South Asian political systems, severely affecting the quality of governance. Corruption not only affects public trust in political leaders but also hinders economic development and the efficient delivery of public services. **Rashid (2017)** contends that corruption is deeply embedded within political parties and government institutions in Pakistan, creating a vicious cycle of inefficiency and political disillusionment. The lack of accountability and transparency in governance has been similarly noted in countries like Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, where political elites often act with impunity, reinforcing the fragile state of democratic institutions.

3. Authoritarianism and the Erosion of Civil Liberties

The rise of authoritarian tendencies in South Asia has been a focal point of recent studies, especially in the context of democratic backsliding. **Haque (2019)** argues in *"The Erosion of Democratic Governance in South Asia"* that the region has seen a steady erosion of democratic norms, with leaders like Narendra Modi in India, Mahinda Rajapaksa in Sri Lanka, and Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh adopting increasingly authoritarian measures. These leaders often employ populist rhetoric to consolidate power, undermining democratic institutions such as the judiciary, the media, and the opposition. **Zahid (2018)** observes that in Pakistan, the military establishment has also played a significant role in undermining civilian rule, thereby eroding the democratic process. The erosion of civil liberties—through restrictions on the press, freedom of speech, and political dissent—has been identified by **Sengupta (2020)** as a key concern, particularly in the post-9/11 era, as governments use national security as a justification for curtailing rights and freedoms.

4. Populism and Electoral Manipulation

Populism has gained considerable traction in South Asia, particularly in the context of rising economic inequality and political disillusionment. **Chatterjee (2015)** argues that populist leaders in countries like India and Pakistan have employed strategies of electoral manipulation, framing themselves as the true representatives of the people while undermining democratic norms. This has been evident in the rise of leaders like Modi, whose political strategy hinges on appealing to the masses through religious and nationalistic sentiments. In *"Populism and Democracy in South Asia"*, **Kumar (2019)** highlights how



populist leaders manipulate democratic processes to maintain power, often undermining the functioning of the legislature and judiciary. Electoral manipulation, including the use of state resources for political campaigns and the targeting of opposition parties, is a key issue in the democratic functioning of the region.

5. Ethnic and Religious Tensions

Ethnic and religious tensions have been significant obstacles to democratic stability in South Asia. **Brass (2003)** in *"The Politics of India's Secularism"* discusses how religious identity politics has increasingly become a divisive factor in India's political landscape. The rise of Hindu nationalism and the marginalization of Muslims under the Modi government has raised concerns about the inclusiveness of Indian democracy. Similarly, **Jalal (2008)** explores the role of ethnicity and religion in Pakistan's politics, noting the tension between the country's Muslim identity and its treatment of religious minorities. In Sri Lanka, **Spencer (2012)** points out how the ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority has deeply affected the political system, leaving a legacy of mistrust in the country's democratic institutions. **Ahmed (2017)** highlights that ethnic and religious polarizations not only exacerbate social divisions but also serve as tools for political elites to gain support, further destabilizing democratic structures.

6. Geopolitical Factors and External Influences

The literature also addresses the impact of external actors and geopolitical considerations on South Asian democracy. **Raghavan (2016)** in *"War and Peace in South Asia: The India-Pakistan Conflict"* argues that the historical conflict between India and Pakistan has contributed to the erosion of democratic governance, as both countries have used security concerns as justifications for military interventions in politics. Moreover, **Pande (2018)** explores how international aid, foreign policy considerations, and relations with global powers like the United States and China influence domestic political dynamics in countries like Nepal and Bangladesh. These external pressures often exacerbate internal tensions, complicating efforts to strengthen democratic institutions.

7. Prospects for Democratic Consolidation

Despite these numerous challenges, some scholars are optimistic about the future of democracy in South Asia. **Sen (2005)** in *"Democracy as a Universal Value"* argues that democratic institutions in South Asia, although under pressure, have demonstrated resilience, particularly in the context of India's sustained democratic experience. **Tharoor (2018)** also contends that while challenges persist, the growing engagement of civil society, the youth, and the media in political discourse presents an opportunity for



democratic renewal. **Rao (2015)** emphasizes that strengthening democratic institutions will require not only political reforms but also social movements that can push back against authoritarian and populist tendencies.

The literature on democracy in South Asia provides a comprehensive view of the multifaceted challenges facing the region's democratic institutions. The common themes across the scholarship are political instability, corruption, authoritarianism, the rise of populism, and the deepening ethnic and religious divides. While some scholars remain optimistic about the region's democratic future, many caution that the erosion of democratic norms poses a serious threat to the stability of South Asia's political systems. Understanding these challenges is crucial to assessing the resilience of South Asian democracies and exploring potential solutions to strengthen democratic institutions in the region.

Historical Context of South Asian Democracy

The history of South Asian democracy is characterized by a complex interplay of colonial legacies, political modernization, and post-independence struggles. The colonial experience, with its centralized and often authoritarian governance structures, shaped the political culture of many South Asian countries. Following independence, the transition to democratic systems was fraught with challenges such as institutional weaknesses, ethnic and religious tensions, and political fragmentation.

India, the largest democracy in the world, offers a compelling example of a nation striving to balance democratic ideals with complex socio-political realities. After gaining independence in 1947, India's democratic institutions were built upon a foundation of parliamentary democracy, a constitution that guaranteed civil liberties, and a free press. Despite these institutional safeguards, India has faced significant challenges in maintaining its democratic norms, especially with the rise of populist politics and concerns about religious and ethnic majoritarianism.

Bangladesh, another South Asian democracy, provides a case study in the fragility of democratic systems in the context of political dynasties and frequent political violence. Despite the establishment of parliamentary democracy after independence in 1971, Bangladesh has experienced recurring military coups, authoritarian governance, and contested elections, weakening the strength of its democratic institutions.

In Sri Lanka, the post-colonial struggle to build a stable democracy was marred by ethnic tensions, particularly between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority. The country's civil war (1983-2009) and its aftermath have left a legacy of mistrust in the political system, undermining democratic institutions.



Thus, while South Asia's nations adopted democratic frameworks post-independence, they have faced persistent challenges to their democratic institutions due to historical legacies, socio-political conflicts, and governance failures.

Key Challenges Facing South Asian Democracies

1. Political Instability and Weak Institutions

Political instability is perhaps the most significant challenge to democratic consolidation in South Asia. In countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh, military coups have disrupted democratic processes, leading to periods of authoritarian rule. Even in countries with established democratic systems, such as India and Nepal, political instability often manifests in coalition politics, weak political parties, and frequent changes in government leadership, creating challenges for governance and policy continuity.

In South Asia, the quality of democratic institutions—parliaments, electoral bodies, and the judiciary—often falls short of delivering effective governance. In many instances, these institutions are undermined by political elites who manipulate them for personal gain, resulting in a lack of public trust. This institutional fragility is exacerbated by corruption, insufficient bureaucratic independence, and weak checks and balances.

2. Corruption and Governance Failures

Corruption remains a pervasive problem in South Asian democracies, severely undermining the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic institutions. The entrenchment of corruption across political, bureaucratic, and judicial systems erodes public trust in governance. In India, for example, high-profile corruption scandals have damaged the credibility of political leaders and institutions, often stalling economic reforms and governance initiatives.

In countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan, corruption within political parties, the military, and law enforcement agencies has created a climate of impunity, where those in power are rarely held accountable for their actions. Corruption not only hinders effective governance but also perpetuates inequality, deepening social divisions and impeding development.

3. Authoritarian Tendencies and Erosion of Civil Liberties

In recent years, some South Asian countries have seen a rise in authoritarian tendencies, as political leaders centralize power and curtail civil liberties in the name of national security, economic development, or



political stability. In India, for example, there has been growing concern over the erosion of democratic norms under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government. The increasing use of executive power, curbs on press freedom, targeted attacks on political dissenters, and the marginalization of religious minorities, especially Muslims, have raised alarm about the future of democracy in the country.

Similarly, in Sri Lanka, the 2019 Easter bombings led to the implementation of emergency laws and restrictions on free speech, stoking fears of a return to authoritarian practices. These developments are symptomatic of a broader trend in South Asia where democratic institutions are increasingly being bypassed or undermined by leaders who prioritize personal or political interests over democratic principles.

Authoritarian practices in the region are often accompanied by the suppression of opposition parties, political dissent, and media outlets, undermining pluralism and democratic accountability. As these tendencies grow, the resilience of democratic institutions continues to be tested.

4. Populism and Electoral Manipulation

Populism has become an increasingly prominent feature of South Asian politics. Leaders in countries like India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka have utilized populist rhetoric to consolidate power, often framing political opponents as enemies of the people. While populism can mobilize large sections of the population, it often comes at the cost of democratic norms, as populist leaders tend to undermine institutional checks and balances.

In India, Modi's appeal to the masses through Hindu nationalism, anti-Muslim rhetoric, and promises of economic growth has energized his political base but also stoked divisions in society. Electoral manipulation, including the use of state resources for political gain and the targeting of opposition parties, has been a key feature of populist politics in South Asia. Similarly, in Pakistan, populist rhetoric often exacerbates tensions between the military establishment and elected civilian governments, creating a volatile political environment.

5. Ethnic and Religious Tensions

Ethnic and religious tensions in South Asia have been a persistent source of instability, challenging the democratic fabric of the region. In India, the rise of Hindu nationalism has deepened religious divides, particularly between Hindus and Muslims, and has raised questions about the inclusiveness of Indian democracy. Similarly, the Buddhist-majority government in Sri Lanka has been criticized for marginalizing Tamil and Muslim minorities, particularly in the context of the post-civil war era.



Bangladesh, too, faces challenges related to religious identity, with tensions between the majority Sunni Muslims and minority religious communities, particularly Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists. In Pakistan, the ongoing conflict between different sects of Islam, alongside the treatment of religious minorities such as Hindus and Christians, continues to strain democratic institutions.

Religious and ethnic divisions have fueled political polarization, leading to the breakdown of national unity and weakening democratic institutions. These tensions often provide political elites with opportunities to exploit divisions for electoral gains, further destabilizing the democratic order.

6. External Influences and Regional Conflicts

South Asia is a region marked by geopolitical tensions, with cross-border conflicts and the influence of foreign powers complicating the political landscape. The India-Pakistan conflict, particularly over Kashmir, has historically influenced domestic politics in both countries, often providing justification for authoritarian measures and military interventions.

In addition to interstate conflicts, the role of foreign powers, including the United States, China, and regional neighbors, has often impacted domestic politics in South Asian countries. The influence of foreign aid, trade relations, and strategic alliances can complicate the functioning of democratic institutions, as political leaders may prioritize foreign interests over domestic democratic processes.

Pathways toward Institutional Resilience

The multi-layered duress facing South Asia's democratic institutions demonstrates that traditional, procedural checks and balances are no longer sufficient to withstand executive overreach and democratic backsliding. Because contemporary democratic erosion in the region occurs incrementally and through legal channels rather than via abrupt constitutional ruptures, fortifying these systems requires structural, proactive interventions. To transition from a state of institutional vulnerability to one of democratic resilience, three primary structural pathways must be pursued.

1. Insulating Fourth-Branch Accountability Organs

The survival of a competitive constitutional democracy depends on the absolute independence of what legal scholars term "fourth-branch" institutions—specifically, election commissions, anti-corruption bureaus, and judicial appointment panels. In the South Asian context, these bodies are frequently co-opted through executive-dominated appointment processes and weaponised to dismantle opposition spaces.



To build resilience, the selection mechanisms for these bodies must be structurally decoupled from the ruling legislative majority. This requires the institutionalisation of multi-partisan, independent selection committees comprising members of the judiciary, opposition leaders, and independent civil society technocrats. Furthermore, these organs must be granted fiscal autonomy, with budgets drawn directly from consolidated state funds rather than relying on executive ministry allocations. Insulating these bodies ensures they can act as neutral arbiters rather than instruments of the ruling regime.

2. Restraining Legal Authoritarianism and Coercive State Apparati

A defining characteristic of democratic duress in South Asia is the phenomenon of "legal authoritarianism," wherein regimes use the letter of the law to violate its spirit. The routine deployment of broad anti-terror legislation, stringent tax audits against non-governmental organisations, and emergency digital security acts has effectively criminalised dissent under a veneer of legality.

Reclaiming the rule of law necessitates immediate legislative and constitutional reforms to narrow the scope of national security exemptions. Broadly drafted statutes must be amended to include strict, unambiguous definitions of state threats to prevent their application against journalists, academics, and political dissidents. Additionally, the judiciary must exercise proactive constitutional review, establishing strict boundaries on executive emergency powers and ensuring that the weaponisation of administrative law is met with immediate, systemic judicial pushback.

3. Formalising Civic Movements into Democratic Channels

While institutional frameworks in South Asia have frequently buckled under executive pressure, the region retains an exceptionally vibrant civic sphere, often characterised by spontaneous, youth-led street mobilisations. However, a recurring vulnerability of these mass movements is their tendency to dissipate after achieving short-term negative goals (such as deposing an autocrat), leaving an institutional vacuum that is easily filled by military or bureaucratic elites.

Democratic resilience requires translating this transient civic energy into permanent institutional watchdogs. Civil society organisations must build institutionalized coalitions capable of sustained policy advocacy and legislative oversight. Furthermore, legal and structural reforms should lower the barriers to entry for new, grassroots political parties. By providing formal, democratic channels for youth and civic activists, the region can move away from volatile cycles of street protest and toward sustainable, long-term institutional representation.

Conclusion

South Asia's democratic institutions are under significant duress as they contend with a multitude of challenges, including political instability, corruption, incremental authoritarianism, populism, ethnic and religious tensions, and external pressures. These challenges systematically undermine the effectiveness and legitimacy of democratic governance, posing a serious threat to political stability across the region. While South Asian countries have made notable strides toward establishing democratic systems, the path to genuine democratic consolidation remains fraught with deep-seated institutional obstacles.

Crucially, the future of democracy in South Asia will not depend on the self-restraint of political elites, but on the structural fortification of its institutions, the safeguarding of fundamental rights, and the formalization of its vibrant civic spaces. Transitioning away from this current state of vulnerability requires a deliberate commitment to meaningful reform—specifically through insulating fourth-branch accountability organs and rolling back the mechanisms of legal authoritarianism. Without these targeted pathways toward institutional resilience, the democratic frameworks of South Asia risk becoming increasingly fragile, further destabilizing the region and impeding its long-term progress.

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