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## POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH ASIA: ITS STAGES, MAIN FORMS AND REGULARITIES OF DEMOCRATIZATION

SYNOPSIS OF A PAPER FOR THE 18<sup>TH</sup> ECOMSAS

Political development of South Asia countries is viewed by the author as a changing combination of authoritarian and democratic components (institutions, structures, practices) of polity in transition after Independence. Their combination varies country-wise and changes in the course of socio-economic development which gradually leads to the reduction of the authoritarian component and to the growth and entrenchment of the democratic one. It can be viewed as *the first and the major regularity of the process of democratization* in South Asia as well as in many other developing countries and even in some major developed countries after World War II and currently in succession states of the former Soviet Union including Russia but save one state which is in fact under a kind of totalitarian regime.

The authoritarian component is conditioned first and foremost by the absence of a competitive multiparty system capable to provide a stable governance and economic development which in this case can be provided by the authoritarian component of the system, be it one-party dominance in essentially democratic political set-up, as in India, or even by the prevailing authoritarian military regime or civilian rule under military control, as in Pakistan. In a South Asian country no regime can dispense with measures for economic development and even a military or military controlled rule cannot dispense with some democratic forms while striving to limit them and prevent their growth.

The democratic component becomes increasingly indispensable for objectively required for transitional society approaching developed one which is a changing society and as such it requires orderly changes of governmental policies and consequently of orderly changes of political leadership as well as the achievement of a balance of conflicting and opposite interests. Hence it can be said that the progress of developing society requires a political system that contain both authoritarian and democratic components at the initial critical stage of democratization. The process of democratization is far from unilinear. It suffered set-backs and interruptions by spells of increased authoritarianism. While eventually resulting from socio-economic development democracy is achieved through political struggle..

British colonial rule being essentially authoritarian introduced particularly at its later stage certain limited and avowedly elitist representative institutions and rule of law that were among pre-requisites for subsequent democratization along with its indigenous historical pre-requisites which emerged both in pre-colonial times and especially in colonial period primarily through the rise and growth of organized freedom movement. However Partition in 1947 largely, albeit not wholly, resulting from colonial policy of 'divide and rule' prevented equal realization of already existing pre-requisites for democratization in the entire subcontinent and consequently led to essential differences between political conditions in its two major newly independent states.

Independent India inherited most of the benefits that ensued from a limited modernization (the present author calls it 'elitist modernization' in its social dimension) as well as most of the benefits ensued from the rise of organized freedom movement led by a national association turning political party, the Indian National Congress under Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhian non-violence meant in fact modern actions of democratic protest conducted by his own specific methods and given his own ideological interpretation. A certain unity of numerous (in absolute terms) and highly diverse middle classes and a broad mass following achieved mostly under Gandhian leadership as well as a widespread organization throughout the country enabled the INC to proceed as the dominant party after Independence. Along with the centralized bureaucratic structure, 'the steel frame' political dominance of the INC provided for stable governance and largely for political stability in essentially democratic set-up and that too in critical conditions of early years of independent national development of a vast and most diverse country.

Pakistan comprising certain relatively less developed areas of the subcontinent lacked above positive factors. It lacked the traditional centre of governance as well as the major industrial centers of former colonial India. The Muslim League was weak in areas that formed Pakistan. It could not play the role of the dominant party and soon become actually defunct while small and tiny political formations were mushrooming. As if this situation by itself was not enough for authoritarian regime to rise the two "wings" of the then Pakistan could not be held together otherwise but by authoritarian rule and that too by precisely the military one which took over after the defeat of the Muslim League in the elections in East Pakistan in 1954. The continued tangle with a stronger India especially in conditions of cold war stimulated further militarization of governance and the entrenchment of the military in the polity so that when direct military rule alternated with

civilian one the latter remained under control of the military. Nevertheless certain elements of democratization were emerging and conceded in the course of time.

One-party dominance of the INC continued for about forty years, as was largely the case of dominant parties in certain big developed countries, namely in the FRG it continued for nearly 20 years, and in Italy and Japan for some 40 years after World War II obvious differences between India and these countries notwithstanding. Meanwhile particularly in India one-party dominance was a major authoritarian component of essentially democratic political system. It limited competitiveness in political process and led to the rise of concentrated personal power of the prime minister even of dynastic nature in what has been called prime minister system in a parliamentary republic. On the other hand socio-economic development stimulated by reformist policies of the INC government and engendered the rise of opposition parties essentially free in India and ultimately capable to present a viable alternative to the dominant INC initially at the level of states and later at the national level.

The rise of opposition parties capable to present an alternative to the dominant party means the emergence of what the present author calls *a system of alternative parties* which is both similar to regular two-party system in its political role and different from in composition. The two main contenders for power are coalitions of several (even numerous) parties formed around the two major parties. Obviously, *the emergence of system of alternative parties as well as coalition politics inseparable from it are regularities (the second and third) of democratization* particularly characteristic for India and in some way or other for the rest of South Asian countries.

The emergence of alternative parties out of plethora of small and tiny parties that mushroomed after Independence resulted from what can be called *regional development of opposition parties*. It is particularly characteristic for India vast and highly diverse ethnically and otherwise. Under one-party dominance of the INC an opposition party, whether recognized as a `national party` having some following in several states or as a `state party` with a certain following in one state, could acquire a substantial electoral strength merely in a few state or in one state only. Consequently the emergent alternative parties were different in different states. It made a great obstacle to the rise of an alternative party at the national level. The obstacle was eventually overcome but not otherwise as through coalition politics. Even in the states the emergent alternative parties could effectively compete with INC in the elections to state legislative assemblies as a rule only in coalitions with smaller parties. Meanwhile coalition politics were resorted to by the

opposition just when the first signs of the weakening of Congress mass influence appeared mostly in the 1960s, but opposition parties influential enough to be alternative had not yet risen even at the state level although there were already some rare exceptions.

In India one can discern two successive types of coalitions, which reflected the development of competitive multiparty system. In a number of Indian states where the INC was defeated in 1967 assembly elections state governments were formed by several different and disparate opposition parties none of which was big enough to claim any leading role. The author called them '*coreless coalitions*'. The state governments formed by such coalitions proved utterly unstable. The Janata Party which came to power at the Centre in 1977 winning the Lok Sabha elections was in fact a coreless coalition and was short-lived. Afterwards, in the 1980s in several states coalitions of opposition parties were formed around bigger parties which rose by that time in the respective states as alternative ones. The coalitions of this type were called by the author '*core-based*' coalitions. They formed reasonably stable governments in the states and so was the BJP-led coalition government at the Centre in 1999 – 2004. The fate of the present INC-led government remains to be seen.

The popular vote for both the INC and the BJP themselves in 1999 – 2004 is far from impressive and it even somewhat decreased: for the INC now at the head of the winning coalition -- from 28.3% in 1999 to 26.7% in 2004, and for the BJP at the head of now losing coalition – from 23.8% to 22.2%. In 1999 the BJP-led coalition of which 15 parties got represented in the Lok Sabha won parliamentary majority albeit not big – about 55% of seats, whereas now the INC-led coalition won only some 40% of seats shared by 11 parties and in fact formed a minority government. Be that as it may, one-party dominance has been replaced by a system of alternative parties one of which is the INC itself but only as an alternative party. Whatever course India's political development may further take the restoration of one-party dominance is obviously excluded.

Along with some decrease of popular vote for the INC and the BJP the vote for the national parties taken together also decreased – from 67.1% in 1999 to 63.1% in 2004 whereas the vote for state parties increased – from 26.9% to 28.8%. The vote for smaller and tiny parties ( '*registered*' ) increased still less – from 3.2% to 4.0% while the independents polled a little more – 4.2% as against 2.7% polled by them in 1999. These changes are not very significant. The national parties have nearly two thirds of popular vote, of them the INC and the BJP together -- 48.9%, the other four national parties –

14.2%. The majority with the national parties in parliament is still much greater than their share of popular vote. The state parties are mostly as avowed protagonists of unity and integrity of India as are the national parties. The sense of the unity of the country is deep rooted in popular consciousness and has not been shaken individual separatist attacks.

An essentially democratic political set-up has been a major factor for India's unity and integrity along with economic planning and regulation, the administrative 'steel frame' and last but far not least one-party dominance of the INC at the critical stage. The present coalition structure of government at the Centre is likely to promote federalism as the twin of political democracy. The development and consolidation of federalism proceeding now in India is one more, *the fourth, regularity of democratization.*

The emergence of a system of alternative parties together with coalition politics reflecting the trend towards a fully competitive multiparty system is interconnected with the decrease of differences between major contending parties on the main issues and principles of organization of society and its development (as shown by a content analysis of election manifestos done by the present author). In fact it means the prevailing acceptance of the main principals of democracy. In other words it is the transition from confrontation to competition being *the fifth regularity of democratization.*

This transition largely conditioned the very emergence of alternative parties along with the development of coalition politics from coreless to core-based coalitions. It proceeded mainly after the climax of reformist policies of building a mixed economy and of agrarian reforms pursued by the INC government and intensified on the threshold of the 1960s and 1970s. More or less similar radicalization of governmental policies in response to rising popular struggles particularly of the widening sections of the middle classes from below and of industrial labour and the awakening rural poor took place in all South Asian countries. The climax of reformist policies was accompanied by acute political confrontation and struggles including the rise of left and right extremism in a kind of revolutionary crisis, which in India led to emergency in 1975-76 and to a much graver spell of authoritarianism in Pakistan in the new independent state Bangladesh. Thereafter economic liberalization was gradually introduced on a certain consensus, in India very gradually.

As has been noted since long, in transitional societies including those in European countries at the early stage of their modernization, the rising new economic, social and political relationships while lacking their own adequate forms and structures

penetrate the existing traditional ones and adopt them to new requirements. The dual role of the caste and the rise of caste-based parties in present India is the clearest case in point. On the one hand caste system being an all-pervasive network of essentially self-governing social organizations resembling in a way civil society, has played a role of an indigenous pre-requisite of democratization, as has been noted by various observers albeit in different wordings. On the other hand this strictly hierarchical system embodies and preserves traditional social inequality and depression of the poor. Nevertheless as a result of socio-economic development since Independence but first and foremost of competitive general elections and formation of elected local self-government bodies (their deficiencies notwithstanding), the traditionally downtrodden are increasingly turning assertive in overcoming the age-long depression. The major efforts for their liberation were started by Mahatma Gandhi and his followers in the Congress and subsequently taken up by the left parties and democratic organizations defending the rights and interests of the poor who also rely on their caste cohesion for the purpose. Particularly in the areas where the Left are strong, the rural poor still suffering from the privation, now would not allow maltreatment any more, as they say. Often they are still illiterate but not “politically illiterate”, as the late Iqbal Narain portrayed the present Indian rural poor. Thus political democracy has facilitated the arduous cause of liberation from social depression. But the still more arduous liberation from poverty of a big mass of people remains a major issue of both socio-economic and political development in India as in the rest of South Asia.

In Pakistan and till the 1990s in Bangladesh military rule alternated with civilian rule so that the time of existence of both the states was near equally divided between military and civilian rule, but the latter was under military control the military retaining their independent establishment ready to take over. Yet in the last analysis the acquiescence to political parties and holding elections, even if manipulated or rigged, tended to undermine authoritarian rule. Characteristically, a military ruler turned president strived to combine his executive powers with a dominant president-led or pro-president party in an elected legislature. However such a party whether led by a general- turned president or by the prime minister in a civilian rule under military control proved unable to get a broad following and to become actually dominant party for more than some time. Yet some of them survived beyond the rule of their patron to become one of the weighty parties in developing multiparty system. Under a civilian rule in Pakistan in 1988-1999 the party led by the prime minister resembled a dominant party but only in one province albeit in the biggest one. It had to coalesce with two regional parties being itself like a

regional party rather than the all-country one. In the decade political parties and the role of the press and local self-government grew. This change materially counted in a situation after the next military coup in 1999. The elections to the National Assembly in 2002 were contested by two alliances of several parties echoing in a way parliamentary elections in India in the same year. The winning alliance led by the party of the general-turned president, the PML (Q) won one fifth of the seats in the national assembly even a little less than what was won (nearly one fourth) by the BJP at the head of the winning alliance in the Lok Sabha elections in 1999. The National Assembly in Pakistan elected in 1999 was described as “hung” and so was Lok Sabha in India but earlier in the 1990s. Whatever may be further goings-on in Pakistan a certain growth of party politics there has been obvious.

Interestingly, India under her republican system had until recently the dominant party like some developed countries mentioned elsewhere above had after World War II. Meanwhile in Pakistan the president from top brass would establish his own party as the dominant one to win elections in addition to his prevailing powers ( in Bangladesh one such party was formed in 1978 six months before the elections which it won). Rather similarly in Russia the prevailing constitutional powers of the president were supplemented in 2000 by pro-president dominant party which was formed also some months before the elections and also won a massive majority in 2004 elections to the Duma. Something of the kind was there in Pakistan and Bangladesh but much earlier and much has changed since then.

In Bangladesh soon after the liberation in 1971 the party that led freedom struggle, the BAL first became the dominant party under its leader who initiated radical reforms aimed at building a state dominated mixed economy. In 1975 the dominance of the BAL was transformed into one-party rule like that in a totalitarian regime but it was overthrown in the same year by an army coup followed by four coups in 1975-1981. Under the regime of a general as the president (1982-1990) who also led his party, the JP as the dominant one, opposition parties grew and so was the case in Pakistan in the same period and for that matter in India too where however the process (the growth of opposition parties) started much earlier and was rather steady.

Meanwhile in Bangladesh a mass movement for democracy launched by the opposition in urban areas led to termination of authoritarian rule. In 1991 presidential republic was transformed into parliamentary one. The decisive role was played by educated middle classes - mostly employees, professionals, students as well as smaller entrepreneurs and industrial labour. As their Indian counterparts they have had marked

traditions of mass actions (hartals, strikes etc), which stemmed from colonial times but were fostered in the struggles for Bengali identity when Bangladesh was a “wing” of Pakistiaan.

Like many different countries after the downfall of authoritarian or totalitarian regime Bangladesh witnessed the explosive multiplication of political parties numbering some 80 in the three parliamentary elections held in 1990s. Incidentally, this was the case in India too, first in the early years of independence and later, so to say in the second time, in the 1990s when one party dominance of the INC was withering away. In Bangladesh a situation similar in this respect appears likely to be resolved by the rise of a system of alternative parties also like in India. If this being the case, it reflects the progress of democratization at all-South Asia scale. An essential progress of democratization achieved in Bangladesh, a Muslim country is particularly indicative.

In the three elections held in Bangladesh in the 1990s the main contenders were the two major parties, the BNP and the BML coalescing with several smaller parties in ‘core-based’ coalitions and alternating in office. However although the elections were held under care-taker governments to provide for fair and free elections (by itself an impressive innovation) the election results were challenged by the losing party and its allies, which resulted in what was called “hartal rule”. Something similar was occurring in India (bandhs etc) but mostly in the 1960s and the issues there were mostly economic rather than those of violation of electoral process. “Hartal rule” reflected a current lack of acceptance of democratic electoral practice that nevertheless paves its way.

Sri Lanka, a much smaller but more developed country in terms of per capita indices than the above three countries, has had a kind of two party system and coalition politics since the 1950s in a parliamentary republic. However an acute political confrontation resulting from a certain radicalization of reformism of the SLFP government formed in a coalition with two left parties in 1970, entailed the introduction of presidential system after the electoral victory of another major party the UNP in 1972. This presidential system in a French style engendered a cohabitation of the two major parties. Essentially democratic political setup has been preserved in Sri Lanka in spite of a leftist rebellion in the early 1970s and in spite of a much deeper and protracted armed ethnic conflict which only now appears to approach its resolution.



Various differences between South Asian countries notwithstanding their political development has revealed certain common trends and “waves” similar in content and simultaneously rising and that too not only within South Asia but also in many other countries (both developing and former socialist countries) and thus having a certain global scale.

In the late 1960s and the early 1970 the climax of social economic reformism and upsurge of political struggle like that in a revolution in all South Asian countries marked the first major period of their independent national development which can be viewed as the revolutionary period or stage. Of the four top reformist leaders of South Asian countries three, Mujibur Rahman, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Indira Gandhi lost their lives and one, Sirimavo Bandaranaike was disqualified for some time.

From the late 1970s and early 1980s South Asian countries entered a new stage marked by a gradually rising wave of political democratization. Its results are yet to be consolidated and advanced. The major obstacle is communalism that plagued politics before and after Independence. Now it has markedly evolved into fundamentalism challenging the basic principles of democracy and breeding terrorist killers. Yet fundamentalism, whether hinduist or islamist or any other is far from being a prevailing trend in South Asian countries but undoubtedly it presents a murderous danger. The effective antidote is yet to be produced by continued socio-economic and political development as well as by national and international security efforts.

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The paper is based primarily on studies (particularly interpretations) by the author. Some of them available in English and two in Russian are referred to below.

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