

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

What the '2024 Year of Elections' Reveals about the State of Democracy in South Asia

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Introduction

2024 was billed as the biggest election year in history. Approximately 70 countries, comprising nearly half of the global population including some of the most consequential democracies, went to polls throughout the year (Masterson 2023). Of these, South Asia, with a population exceeding 1.8 billion, hosted the highest number of elections. Bhutan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives all conducted national polls. This electoral cycle unfolded against the backdrop of growing authoritarian tendencies, accelerating democratic backsliding, shrinking civic space, and the steady erosion of democratic institutions. These developments were compounded by mounting voter discontent with the performance of their respective governments. Although elections were marked by high degree of voters' participation a notable voter turnout, particularly among female and younger demographics, there were also numerous instances of voter suppression, intimidation, and attacks on opposition parties and candidates. Concerns regarding the integrity of electoral management institutions and the dissemination of disinformation also emerged (Bano 2024). While elections in some countries (particularly Sri Lanka and India) showed renewed hope in terms of democratic re-opening and opposition gaining grounds, others (such as Bangladesh and Pakistan) witnessed electoral manipulation, voter suppression, and rising political violence. In the following pages, we attempt to capture some of the key trends from these elections and democratic churns in major democracies of South Asia.

Bangladesh: From Authoritarianism to Revolution

On January 7, 2024, Bangladesh held its 12th parliamentary elections since 1971, electing Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for her fifth term (Anbarasan and Ng 2024). The elections were marked by unprecedented levels of violence, widespread voters' suppression, and the complete domination of the ruling Awami League, which many analysts called as a "sham election" (Kurlantzick 2024). The one-sided elections, which saw the main opposition the Bangladesh Nationalist Party or BNP boycott the polls, resulted in Hasina's party capturing 225 of the 300 parliamentary seats. It is noteworthy that Hasina's prolonged and uninterrupted rule, spanning 15 years, has contributed to the economic revitalization of Bangladesh, which had previously been experiencing stagnation in the recent years.

According to the World Bank's Global Economic Prospects report, the country is poised to achieve the sixth highest GDP growth in Asia. Yet, her 15-year tenure was characterized by authoritarian rule, systematic targeting of opposition leaders and activists, and the capture of state institutions. This period also witnessed growing economic inequality, which led to frequent street protests and mounting public discontent (Faiaz 2024).

In the early months of 2024, Hasina appeared to be unassailable for a fifth term in office. However, a student protest in early June 2024 over a controversial High Court judgment that re-established a job quota reserving 30 percent of government services for the children of freedom fighters of Bangladesh's liberation war culminated in a nation-wide agitation that led to the sensational collapse of the powerful Hasina regime in August 2024 (Khasru 2024). The student-led agitation, which saw unprecedented police brutality resulting in over 300 fatalities, escalated to such an extent that the security forces were unable to suppress it, compelling Hasina to flee to New Delhi, India. The unexpected end of Hasina's authoritarian rule has brought a caretaker government led by Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus, to hold free and fair elections and facilitate the formation of a new government (*The Hindu* 2024-08-17). Despite the high expectations for the Yunus administration to ensure stability during Bangladesh's democratic transition, significant challenges remain in maintaining the country's future as a secular democracy. The public's resentment towards years of authoritarian rule presents a rare opportunity to consolidate democracy in Bangladesh. However, there are genuine fears that the well-earned change might be hijacked by extremists and fringe groups, as evidenced by the rising attacks against religious minorities (Foo 2024). The democratic upsurge of August 2024 is a crucial factor in this regard, and it is imperative that the progress made in 2025 is not in vain.

Nepal: Democratic consolidation and political instability go hand-in-hand

Nepal held its National Assembly election on January 25, 2024 in which the ruling coalition led by Nepali Congress and Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Center) won the most seats (*The Hindu* 2024-01-26). While progress of multi-party democracy in Nepal in the aftermath of prolonged Maoist insurgency movement is regarded as a major democratic success story in South Asia, its transition from monarchy to democracy since the commencement of the 2015 constitution has been chaotic and politically volatile. Nepal has witnessed the formation of 14 governments in the past 16 years (*The Hindu* 2024-07-18). Nepal's general elections have repeatedly resulted in hung parliaments, necessitating the formation of coalition governments comprising primarily three political parties helmed by their respective leaders. Prachanda from the Communist Party of Nepal–Maoist Centre (CPN–MC), KP Sharma Oli from the Communist Party of Nepal–Unified Marxist–Leninist (CPN–UML), and Sher Bahadur Deuba from the Nepali Congress (NC) have intermittently served as Prime Minister of Nepal in recent years.

The most recent and unexpected political turn occurred in July 2024, when bitter opponents Nepali Congress and the leftist CPN-UML led by Prime Minister Oli, joined hand to establish a coalition government (Gelal 2024). The latest political turmoil was triggered last year when Oli's party UML decided to withdraw its support from the government led by the incumbent Prime Minister Prachanda, leading to Prachanda's removal from office due to a trust vote. Oli, with the support of the NC, assumed the role of Prime Minister in July 2024 for the fourth time,

marking the latest occurrence in the continuous entry and exit of coalition leaders within the government, a phenomenon known as the ‘revolving door’ of Nepalese politics (Sigdel 2024). Such political instability, fueled by personal ambitions, has the propensity to undermine state institutions, derail coherent developmental policy vision, and delay the consolidation of federal democratic structures in Nepal.

Pakistan: Democratic hope alive amidst rising political instability

After postponing for months, Pakistan held its general elections in February 2024, which witnessed the coordinated suppression of former Prime Minister Imran Khan and his party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). Khan, who had previously been imprisoned on serious charges and barred from participating in the February elections, witnessed the electoral success of hundreds of his supporters, despite widespread intimidation and violence against his followers (*Reuters* 2023-12-30).

It may be recalled that Khan, a former star cricketer, launched his own party riding on his stardom-driven popularity and served as Prime Minister from 2018 to 2022 as the leader of a coalition government. Khan’s rise to power being hailed as the choice of the military establishment as opposed to leaders of other established political parties such as the PML-N and the PPP. However, during his tenure as Prime Minister, Khan’s relationship with the powerful military establishment deteriorated, leading to allegations of corruption and anti-national activities (Shahzad 2024). Following Khan’s ouster after losing the trust vote, Sjaibaz Sharif, PML-N leader and brother of former Prime Minister (exiled after differences with the army), took over as the Prime Minister. The Supreme Court revoked Khan’s party emblem, compelling its candidates to participate in the elections as independent. Despite all efforts to dwindle Khan’s political support, including attempts to delay the elections, a surprising outcome emerged: Khan’s independent candidates got the plurality of seats in the 2024 elections (Afzal 2024). Conversely, as second and third largest party and with army support, Shahbaz Sharif became the Prime Minister for second time with support from the rival Pakistan People’s Party (PPP). The credibility of the February elections has been called into question by numerous analysts, who have alleged that the military has orchestrated the results to serve its own interests (Shams 2024).

While the army has installed another puppet regime, getting rival parties together, the optimistic aspect of the general election was the erosion of the military’s iron grip over democratic institutions. This was vindicated by millions voters particularly the youth defying the army’s diktat and voting en masse for the banned PTI candidates (Saifi and Mogul 2024). Further, the elections proceeded with decent political participation, despite the prevailing fear of terror attacks just before the polling day. This allowed for the possibility of a civilian government taking power, breeding hope for a more vibrant democracy.

To sum up, Pakistan’s democracy has witnessed unprecedented political turmoil in recent decades. The persistent threat of terrorism, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, ethnic insurgency, and the pervasive influence of the military have contributed to the destabilization of democratic consolidation in the country (*BBC News* 2024-02-01). However, the February election has reopened Pakistan’s democratic space in most unexpected ways.

Maldives: Democratic Consolidation amidst nationalistic polarization

The small island nation of the Maldives held its parliamentary elections in April 2024, in which the ruling party of the incumbent president Mohamed Muizzu, The People's National Congress (PNC), secured a supermajority in Parliament. The election results have given the ruling party direct control over 73 out of 93 parliamentary seats (Shivamurthy 2024). It may be recalled that Muizzu, a proxy candidate for the jailed former President Abdulla Yameen (a known pro-China backer) won the September 2023 Presidential polls. Muizzu defeated the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), pro-India main opposition party which previously had won supermajority (*The Guardian* 2024-04-22).

The Maldives's successful conduct of parliamentary elections since 2008, featuring numerous political parties, indicates the consolidation of procedural democracy. The Election Commission of the Maldives has been credited by international bodies for its efforts in ensuring the integrity and transparency of the electoral process, thereby enhancing voter awareness (The Commonwealth 2023-09-11). The proliferation of smaller political parties and the increase in the number of candidates in the electoral fray for the presidential elections have been noted in recent years, indicating the vibrancy and competitiveness of the democratic system (Freedom House 2024). However, allegations of rampant vote buying and the dissemination of political misinformation remains as glaring structural challenges in the Maldives (Zalif 2024). In addition to these challenges, the nation is confronted with the rise of radicalism among its youth and the looming threats of economic stagnation and climate change.

The most salient challenge confronting the Maldivian democracy, however, is the rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape, marked by the intensifying rivalry between India and China in the Indian Ocean. The escalating geopolitical importance of the Maldives in the Indian Ocean region has made it a fulcrum of power politics, as evidenced by the transiting of global east-west shipping lanes through the archipelago. In this context, the incumbent President Muizzu's pro-China stance is adversely impacting the archipelago nation's long-time alliance with India. Muizzu's electoral success with a strong parliamentary majority, achieved by "India Out" election campaign, is likely to further consolidate his position, enabling him to pursue pro-China policies with greater ease. His administration has expelled 89 Indian troops operating reconnaissance aircraft gifted by the Indian government, which were utilized for patrolling Maldives' maritime borders (*The Guardian* 2024-04-22). These developments could further polarize the electorate alongside nationalistic lines, exploiting the India-China rivalry in the Indian Ocean (*Al Jazeera* 2024-04-21). In short, the Maldivian democratic future hinges on the adept navigation of geopolitical dynamics.

Sri Lanka: From Protests Politics to of the New Era of Inclusive Democracy

In 2024, no other South Asian election witnessed a real time political earthquake than Sri Lanka did (Uyangoda 2024). The oldest democracy in South Asia, mired in huge post-Covid economic turmoil and prolonged street protests, held its presidential elections on September 23, 2024, and its parliamentary elections in mid-November, yielding historic results. A fringe communist party leader Aruna Kumara Dissanayake of Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), in alliance with the National People's Power (NPP), swept both elections and secured an unprecedented two-third majority in

parliamentary polls. The NPP's sweep is particularly remarkable given that the party received a mere 3 percent of national votes in the 2019 polls. This outcome marks a fundamental shift in Sri Lanka's democratic politics, which had historically been controlled by westernized elites and a privileged minority from Colombo. Since 1948, Sri Lanka's politics has largely ensured the uninterrupted dominance of the Colombo elite (Uyangoda 2024).

The political earthquake initiated by the NPP was facilitated by two crucial developments in 2022. Firstly, the economic crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19, which nearly brought the country to a momentary balance of crisis in 2022, left millions of poor and middle-class citizens struggling for survival. Secondly, the confluence of economic hardship and deep disenchantment with political elites culminated the Aragalaya citizens' protest in 2022 (DeVotta 2025). In short, economic stagnation, rising income disparities, and growing popular resentment of corrupt elites, coupled with the rise of anti-incumbency sentiments, found strong resonance in NPP's call for a "corruption-free and pro-poor government." As Sri Lanka embarks on a new and genuinely inclusive democracy, it is imperative to exercise caution. Bringing 'genuine change,' while breaking the entrenched hold of the elite on power, will undoubtedly pose significant challenges for any leader or party lacking substantial experience in governance. Given Sri Lanka's ongoing economic challenges, the nation's leaders face significant challenges, though not insurmountable ones, given the substantial public support for the new government.

India: Democracy back on the Menu

2024 was an eventful year for the world's largest democracy. India has undergone a steady shift towards authoritarianism since 2014, particularly under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has been accused of undermining the opposition. This dynamic has led to concerns regarding the integrity of the national elections, which were closely observed by many observers (Sahoo 2024a). The parliamentary elections were marked by widespread accusations of electoral manipulation, lack of level conditions for opposition parties, and allegedly biased Election Commission. The ruling dispensation unleashed a mega campaign, completely dominated the media and information spaces, and was perceived as likely to secure a third consecutive term in office, with projections indicating a victory that would yield more than 400 out of 543 seats in parliament. Yet, despite the ruling party's efforts, the opposition mounted a vigorous campaign, raising concerns about the constitution and affirmative action (reservation policy for marginalized communities) under the Modi 2.0 administration (Ranjan 2024).

The election results declared on June 4 took the ruling BJP by surprise. Contrary to the predictions of numerous pollsters, who had forecasted an outright victory for the BJP, the ruling party failed to secure a simple majority in the lower house. The results led to a notable shift in the balance of power, significantly benefiting the opposition alliance (named INDIA) particularly the Indian National Congress, which secured 99 seats. While 272 seats were required to attain a clear majority in the Lok Sabha (lower house), the ruling BJP secured a mere 240 seats (compared to its 303 seats in the 2019 election). However, with the support of its alliance partners, the BJP formed the government for the third time in June (Rajvanshi 2024). Of particular note, the BJP experienced significant electoral setbacks in its traditional strongholds, particularly in states such as Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra, among others (Basak 2024).

In sum, the 2024 election results significantly bolstered the opposition, which had been experiencing a period of decline, and led to an expansion of democratic space by making democratic processes more competitive. While the government will retain its authority, albeit with the support of coalition partners, it will be unable to fully counteract authoritarian tendencies. The government will not have the freedom to weaponize key state institutions against opposition parties and other critics of the party (Mehta 2024). A strong showing by opposition parties, particularly the INC, could foster greater electoral competition and enhanced accountability in parliament and among the public. Conversely, a less dominant BJP would likely empower regional and identity-based parties, thereby amplifying their voice and bargaining power within a multifaceted federal system.

Three Broad Trends

What do the trends from the elections indicate about the democratic health of the major South Asian countries in 2025 and in the years that follow? Do these trends suggest democratic consolidation and resilience, or do they indicate a continuation of the status quo?

Firstly, it is evident that while political developments and authoritarian tendencies persist as challenges, major democracies, notably India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, have exhibited remarkable resilience. Opposition and civil society demonstrated a resurgence in 2024, despite the efforts of the state and ruling parties to subvert these movements. This assertion is evidenced by notable instances such as the Sri Lankan street protests that signaled the conclusion of the Rajapaksa administration, and the student protests in Bangladesh that brought an end to Hasina's 15-year authoritarian rule. In Pakistan, where the military wields significant influence beyond the constitutional framework to influence regime change, the military has encountered limited support from voters.

Secondly, a noticeable feature of all the major elections in South Asian countries is the high participation of women and youth. Not only youth-led protests that brought political upheavals and regime changes in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, but they did also shape the electoral outcomes in countries like Pakistan and India. This phenomenon is a promising indication for the advancement and fortification of democracy in South Asia.

Thirdly, however, there are also worrisome trends, including growing instances of violence and threats to electoral integrity. These include political violence, intimidation and attacks on opposition parties and candidates, voter suppression, and rising doubts over the integrity of electoral management institutions. Additionally, threats of disinformation and foreign election influence operations, particularly from Chinese sources, have emerged. Of particular concern is the observable decline or weakening of key counter-majoritarian institutions, particularly electoral bodies, the judiciary, legislative institutions, and the media. This suggests that the authoritarian threats persist, albeit with reduced intensity. ■

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