

A draft for discussion

Security and Governance in South Asia

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1. Introduction

Security has been one of the most important concerns of individuals, communities and states ever since they came into existence. During the Cold War period, the major ideological camps perceived threat to their security interests from each other. The post-Cold War world has witnessed a number of internal security threats in many states including the super powers. Soviet Union disintegrated not because of external military invasion, but because of internal reasons. Now the separatist movements such as those in Chechnya have challenged the security of Russia. USA felt shocks such as the bombing of the Federal State building in Oklahoma in April 1995, and the terrorist attacks of 9/11, 2001. These are non-traditional or non-military threats. One can argue that these threats emanate from the issues of governance or mis-governance, and may be more serious in the poorer developing nations than in the advanced ones.

South Asia as a whole is one of the poorest and the most conflict-ridden regions and, therefore, an area of grave security concerns. There have been many books and papers on the South Asian countries, dealing with the 'security threats' perceived as 'coming from external sources,' namely, the neighbors and the global powers. Traditional security analysts generally define 'national security' in terms the foreign threat or attack or its absence. Hence there have been alliances such as NATO, ASEAN, and the defunct SEATO and Warsaw Pact. However, unlike the military scientists or other security analysts, a common man takes 'security' in terms of the freedom or prosperity that he enjoys, the employment opportunity that is available to him, the food and shelter that is safe for him, or, at least, an environment in which he feels that he can make progress for himself and his own family. In the absence of these fundamental needs, the terms such as 'national security, independence, sovereignty, or territorial integrity' become mere academic jargons that do not mean much for him. Such security as defined by a citizen is closely related with the question of governance, and has an internal dimension of security/insecurity, which has become a prime area of concern today.

2. Internal Conflict and Insecurity

This paper is, therefore, focused particularly on the incidence of mis-governance, which is the main cause of internal insecurity in every individual state in South Asia. Clearly, mis-governance in the region has resulted in our failure to substantially reduce poverty, one of the main breeding grounds of ‘terrorism’ or ‘security threat.’ Specifically, it is argued that the main causes of internal conflict are (1) poverty, (2) oppression or the lack of equal freedom (which may include autonomy, decentralized power or right to self-determination), (3) unemployment or the lack of opportunity, (4) injustice and (5) mis-governance that builds up an overall environment of insecurity to the people as well as the government themselves when a group of people or community takes up arms, or uses violent means against these negative conditions. Conversely, (1) prosperity, (2) equal freedom, (3) employment opportunities, (4) fair justice and (5) good governance result in internal security as the people enjoy their life in those positive conditions, and see no reason for taking to insurgency or violent ‘terrorist’ activities.

It is commonly acknowledged that poverty, one of the main causes of insecurity, is rampant in South Asia as a whole. It contains about 22 per cent of humanity, whereas it makes a meager 6 per cent of the world income; more than 46 per cent of the world’s illiterate people live in South Asia, and 50 per cent of the world’s malnourished children also live in this region (Huq, 1997). There is no need here for an elaborate discussion of poverty in each country of this region.

Oppression is another major cause of conflict and national insecurity. Ethnic minorities and smaller religious communities and regional groups in South Asian countries feel oppressed since they don’t enjoy the same freedom and rights and equal treatment as the traditionally privileged groups do. Even in India where politics operates more or less within the framework of democracy, the ethnic groups in the northeastern states seem to have felt as marginalized, and there are conflicts leading to insurgencies (Verghese, 1996). In Sri Lanka, the Tamils felt the same and have taken up arms. In Bangladesh, the indigenous people of the Chitagong Hill tract seem to feel the same problem as they are overpowered or gradually over-numbered by the majority Muslims. In Bhutan, the Nepali-speaking people feel oppressed by the royal government – a fact proven by more than a hundred thousand Bhutanese refugees in South Eastern Nepal.

The Maoist insurgency in Nepal itself does not seem to have originated merely from the oppression of ethnic groups as all the poor people, regardless of their ethnic or caste identity, feel oppressed, indicating the persistent mis-governance. In Pakistan, the religious minorities seem to be at the center of such conflicts. In Sri Lanka, the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict seems to have the same cause – oppression of the minorities by the majority on the political, linguistic and ethnic bases.

There is also a high unemployment rate in south Asia that fuels conflict and insecurity at the individual, social and national levels. Almost all the South Asians particularly, the Nepalese, Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Indian labors in the Arab countries working under harsh conditions indicate the lack of employment opportunities at home which is often measured by the poverty of opportunity index (POPI) as defined by Mahbub ul Huq – an example of bad or weak governance. This situation decreases the people's faith in their respective governments, and alienates them from the functioning of the state machinery as a whole.

3. South Asia's Vicious Circle of Political Instability and Conflict

As a result of mis-governance that may be defined basically by the state's inability to reduce poverty and injustice felt by the people, there has been severe political instability South Asia in general and Nepal and Pakistan in particular. While Nepal has presented itself as a classic case of in-fight in the political parties and witnessed 13 governments in the last 13 years, Pakistan is playing a seesaw between the military rule and democracy. A civil war-like situation has embroiled Sri Lanka in a very debilitating conflict for over two decades, whereas Bangladesh suffers from the non-participation of the opposition party in the parliamentary procedures, raising questions about the very validity and the usefulness of the periodic general elections.

Political instability results in the instability in civil administration or bureaucracy as every new political leadership that comes to power makes changes in the bureaucracy by transferring the civil servants at critical positions, thus hampering the progress of development projects that are meant to improve the socio-economic conditions of the society in general. And, as the poverty-stricken societies of South Asia feel the despair of economic stagnation and unemployment, they become ready for any action including

violence. Such violence then threatens to dislodge the government. Thus the vicious circle of political instability and poverty in the region comes to a full circle.

However, unlike other countries in the region, India has had more or less stable democracy. Since its independence, it has not had such a detrimental political instability (defined as ‘too frequent changes in the government sometimes by military coup or other political debacles’) as the changes in the Indian governments have taken place within the framework of democracy. However, there have been other factors at the policy and practical levels, which have hindered the pace of development in the country, giving rise to insurgencies and terrorism. For instance, if the state ownership and management of several industries in India before the early 1990’s hampered efficiency and productivity that could otherwise contribute to a significant reduction of poverty in the country, privatization and liberalization (in the 1990s and more recently) without proper safety nets for the poor has resulted in the thousands of cases of suicide by the farmers. That is a serious matter in a country, which is still predominantly agricultural. The recent general election results in India, particularly in Andhra Pradesh were due to the neglect suffered by the farmers.

According to *Human Development in South Asia 1999* (1999: 112), “around 1,000 people took their own lives, many committing public self-immolation as a final act of protest in Pakistan during 1998-99.” This is just a part of the story of poverty and deprivation caused by political instability and mis-governance. In Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan, the political instability and the resulting disruption of socio-economic development have clearly given rise to insurgencies and various types of serious social unrest. Because of the internal problems of governance beside the Indo-Pak stalemate on the issue of Kashmir, even the specific objectives of reducing poverty and fighting against terrorism set by SAARC have remained an unfulfilled dream.

4. Governance or Mis-governance

Political scientists have discussed the issue of governance as the function of the government, mainly the executive branch of the state. Kohli (1990), Baral, (1993), De Silva, (1993), Hussain (1993), Phadnis (1986), Sen Gupta (1993) – all put more emphasis on the political aspects and administrative capacity of the government to maintain peace and security in the country. Similarly, economists have discussed the question of

governance in terms of its role in the economic growth and equity in society. *Nepal Human Development Report (2001)*, for example, has the title 'Poverty Reduction Governance.' Undoubtedly, poverty reduction, through economic growth, is one of the main functions of the government in any South Asian country.

However, for a common man, as it has already been mentioned earlier, the question of governance and security is a broad concept, and much more than the 'function of the executive branch' of the state described by the political scientists, or just the question of 'economic growth and equity' described by the economists. It involves all aspects of the state: (1) the legislative, (2) the executive and (3) the judiciary, and other bodies such as the bar associations, (4) the election commission and human rights commission, and (5) the political parties, and (6) the role of the civil society. In other words, it involves the very process of the creation of the state power, the question of the legitimacy of the government, its authority to rule, or its monopoly in the use of violence at times when it may be necessary indeed.

Now, let us see how each of the six elements, listed above, are functioning in South Asia. The legislative part of the state does not seem to be properly representing the people in the region. Almost half of the parliamentarians in India and Pakistan are landlords (Mahbub ul Huq Human Development Center, 1999:6). Once elected, the parliamentarians do not remain in touch with the people. Some of them have not been able to spend even the special budget given to them by the government for the socioeconomic development of their constituencies. Although the practice of giving such a special budget to the incumbent MP's may be questionable since it gives them an additional edge against their rivals in the periodic elections that are expected to be fully free and fair, there exists such provision in many South Asian countries, e. g., India and Nepal. But wherever the MP's have spent such budget, there have been allegations of misappropriations. In a highly stratified society of the region, a huge number of poor people, ethnic or tribal communities and caste groups feel unrepresented or under-represented in the parliaments, wherever they exist. There are conflicts associated with ethnic or tribal identities in almost all countries of South Asia, except the Maldives probably.

The executive branches of the states in South Asia are allegedly acting in a manner that is not accountable to the people. According to the *Human Development in South Asia*

1999 (pp.2-10), the bureaucracies are highly bloated; there is inefficiency, corruption and a rent-seeking tendency. Transparency International (TI) ranks some countries in the region among the highest in the corruption perception index (CPI). (See the 2004 Report of TI). Even India, which is said to be relatively better governed, witnessed cases like the Bofors scandal. There does not seem to be adequate decentralization of authority in smaller countries such as Nepal and Bhutan. Development planning and implementation of the development projects ignore the very people whom they are meant for.

The judiciary, and other bodies such as the bar associations have little faith of the people. The people of South Asia in general find it very difficult to get justice of the legal courts in their own countries. “A basic deficiency of the judicial system throughout the region has been the lack of effective access to justice for large sections of the population, mainly due to poverty” (*Human Development in South Asia, 1999: 65*). Justice is also delayed in South Asia for reasons such as bribery, inadequate facilities in the courts, and lack of moral sense in the judicial authorities. Many countries had a huge number of pending cases in the court: Bangladesh (6.5 million), India (22.0 million), Nepal (0.08 million), Pakistan (0.75 million), thus about 29.3 million cases in total (*Ibid.*). There have been persistent allegations of corruption also in the legal courts of these countries.

The election commission and human rights commission are weak. Recently, India has had much fairer elections as the work of the Election Commission was strengthened. Booth-capturing or vote-tampering was common even in India where democracy has been regarded as relatively in better condition than in other South Asian countries. Sociologists and political analysts believe that such cases booth-capturing took place only where the political parties had their strongholds anyway, so the election results would be more or less the same even if there were no such incidents of booth capturing. In this way, they justify the validity to the elections, despite their being so flawed. In Nepal the parties in government usually won the elections by the misuse of power.

The political parties in South Asia have not been able to organize themselves on the basis of ideology, policies and programs. There is a culture of personal loyalty and opportunism, which is phenomenon that can hardly be called ‘a political culture.’ The tendencies of the dynastic rules are cited not only in smaller countries such as Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan, but also in India. This seems to be a South Asian political culture.

5. Good Governance

The quality of governance is determined ultimately by the popular perception. The questions are: How are the elections organized? How do the people feel about them? Are they fair enough – not just in terms of free and fair polling and the correct counting of votes but also in terms of who the candidates are, and whether they represent various sections and the moral expectations of the society or not? If the legislative body and the executive branch do not emerge as representatives of, and accountable to the all sections of the society in a true sense, the elections hardly establish any legitimacy of the government.

Roughly speaking, people's participation, accountability to them and transparency (PAT) are the three main elements of good governance, which must be reflected in all the bodies and functioning of the state. They are interrelated in such a way as if they form a three-sided prism. Free and fair elections become a legitimizing process only if the people's participation in them is truly voluntary, and if the elected leaders are truly representative. Accountability is related to the moral obligation of the elected leaders and the bureaucrats performing the duties of the state on one hand and the people's perception as such on the other. Legislators passing laws for increasing their own perks and benefits such as pensions and duty-free cars can hardly be seen as working with a sense of public accountability. Transparency in the government means that the people must be able to see what the state machinery (legislative, executive and judiciary) is doing. The state must be transparent not only in matters of public accounting, but also in the policy and its justification.

It is a universal fact that the people – educated or not -- are the ultimate source of legitimacy, and keep the latent energy and power with them to pick up the arms, and challenge the monopoly of the state in the use of violence, if the governance in a broad sense is not fair to them. South Asia as a whole is replete with examples. Even the Maldives beside others has started seeing problems in this respect. Obviously, the insurgencies in South Asia, like elsewhere in the world, have originated from the problems of governance or mis-governance.

India may not be facing a really serious crisis of security originating from governance problems. It has a relatively better-functioning democracy, more credible

parliament, more decentralized and pluralistic power distribution, more credible judiciary (at least at the Supreme Court levels), more free press, and more educated elite in the power centers. However, the marginalized states and societies pose the problems of insurgency. Northeastern states of India seem to be the hotbeds of insurgencies caused by the people's sense of oppression and alienation from the center. Sections of people in Bihar, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh and other parts seem to carry a sense of economic deprivation and sociopolitical and cultural exclusion, leading to the insurgencies and "terrorism" posing serious internal security challenges to the state and central governments. Recently, the question of equity and justice came into focus when thousands of Indian farmers were reported to have committed suicide despite the impressive annual economic growth rates.

6. Sense of Moral Obligation and National Vision

Good governance is based not only on good laws and law-enforcement mechanisms, but also on the sense of moral obligation of political and bureaucratic leadership. So what is needed is a sense of moral obligation to the people, and a national vision with a capacity to build institutions to translate that vision into a reality. Despite their questionable democratic credentials, leaders like Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, Muhammad Mahathir of Malaysia, and Park Chung Hee of South Korea, for example, brought their countries from the third world status to almost the first world status with their hard work, inspired by their own national visions and the sense of moral obligations to their people.

7. Leadership and the Rule of Law

A former foreign secretary of India once in a private and informal chat with me said: "India has to maintain good relations with its neighbors, reduce its defense budget and spend more on social and economic development in order to achieve its national security goals." Obviously, that is true for all the SAARC member states. In fact, from the people's point of view that is what constitutes good governance and security indeed. But for that to happen we need a true leadership committed to the rule of law.

Lee Kuan Yew, writing a brief preface to his autobiography, *The Singapore Story*, says, "I hope that they will know that the honest and effective government, public order

and personal security, economic and social progress, did not come about as the natural course of events.” He is obviously hinting at his efforts as a leader to establish the government that is run by the rule of law and a vision for the country.

To quote the *Human Development in South Asia*, (1999:10) again, “Five decades ago, ‘governance’ had not been established as the buzz word among policy makers; yet for the vast majority of South Asians who had won their freedom from the British colonial rule and the right to determine their own lives as South Asians, the concept of effective governance was firmly embedded in the popular imagination and associated with the heroes of the era: Gandhi and Nehru, Jinnah, and Bandaranaike. But that dream withered over time, with governments retreating into military dictatorships, one party rule, and the same feudal relation, which had persisted under the British Raj. Pakistan’s democratic era barely lasted a decade before an era of military regimes began, followed by the turbulent break up of the country in 1971, and the tumultuous early years of Bangladesh. India witnessed a decay of the Congress Party, and the shattering Emergency years. Nepal’s monarchy gave way partially, but to a still weak democracy, while Bhutan’s monarchy remained in place. Sri Lanka saw years of peace and prosperity give way to Tamil-Sinhalese divisions and finally the ongoing, horrific war with the LTTE.” Now the question is: Do we have a leadership that can rescue and revive the region with a sincere commitment to the rule of law inspired by a vision?

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