ABSTRACT

The region has witnessed the impact of the information revolution, which has heightened awareness on principles like human rights and fostered the growth of politically awakened middle class. With the advent of the new millennium, there has been a resurgence in the efforts to consolidate democracy in this historically determined South Asian space. Today, democratisation has become an imperative for individual states and holds significance for the region as a whole. The fourth wave of democracy represents a multifaceted development that has had a profound impact on socio-political dynamics and equivocally, shaped the discourse on governance, human rights and political participation.

In the wake of gaining independence, the majority of nations in the region opted for representative democracy as their preferred system of governance. But the experience on their journey towards democratisation had been manifested by a blend of successes and impediments. Apart from India, all relegated into a non-democratic system. Specially Pakistan and Myanmar. Politically, this space is more of a complex region with diverse political systems. The region consists of both democratic and non-democratic, semi-democratic countries, each with its own unique political dynamics. Although primarily Pakistan, Myanmar and Sri Lanka inherited fairly operative state apparatuses, they are facing challenges. Countries like, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Myanmar, in few preceding years, even if symbolically, for a brief period of time and at regular intervals have adopted the democratic form of governance.

Though this research paper has no intention to establish any statistical correlation between the two, but a close relationship is too overt to deny. Yet frequent qualms and reservations have surfaced regarding the nature and understanding of democracy. The predominant view holds that democracy by far continues to be the aspiration and the most preferred political arrangement of the people in the region. Therefore, people in the subcontinent have repeatedly struggled and partially attained formal democracy but failed to sustain the transition from a 'formal' to 'substantive' democracy (Desouza, Palshikar and Yadav 2008: 88-89). More than a seven decades of election-centric democracy in the region have illustrated the fact that merely casting votes does not suffice for the consolidation and sustenance of democracy. The ever-widening gap between legitimately elected governments at various parts and their actual performance have reared disillusionment among large segments of the electorate (Oberst et. al 2019: 489-90). The further exploration of the course political

narrative of countries in the region reveals that the paraphernalia of democracy have provided an avenue for unrepresentative elites to seize power and further their own interests. Thus, like scores of other developing regions, the Indian sub-continent also remained susceptible to the fallacy of electoralism, which has allowed the political elite to borrow cunningly some of the features of democracy in order to substantively avoid it (Schedler 2002: 103). However, owing to the varied indigenous understanding of democracy, this region has experienced a unique prototype of democratisation in a multi-dimensional socio-economic backdrop, which might be a lesson for the democratic west who are grappling with the challenges of multi-culturalism. Thus, a large section of scholars firmly believes that the "idea of democracy has transformed South Asia as much as South Asia has transformed the idea of democracy itself" (CSDC, SDSA Team 2008: 61).

The process of democratic consolidation by means of the establishing stable and effective democratic institutions has been hindered by a range of complex challenges. The common challenges faced by countries during their transition have been, political instability, whereby the nations have grappled with frequent changes in leadership, weak institutions, and coalition politics; and has often led to short-lived governments, making it challenging to implement long-term policy initiatives and foster democratic stability. Furthermore, Military interventions have been a recurring challenge. The lack of transparency and accountability in governance has hindered equitable development and undermined the credibility of democratic processes.

The democratic trajectory of the states leads us to a crucial realization that genuine democracy encompasses not merely a political system but also a collective commitment of the civilian authority to the well-being and political participation of the populace; and a persistent effort to ensure this principle. It emphasizes that democracies necessitate a shift in mindset of the citizens. They must actively engage with democratic principles rather than relying solely on legal frameworks and regulations. The prevalent absence of a robust democratic governance in South Asia give scope for questioning the true representativeness of the institutions. Steady regime transitions in different parts of the world agree that the democratisation of a country depends not only on electing a new government through free, fair, and competitive elections, but also on a comprehensive political refurbishment. The new political leaders must enjoy sufficient and truly effective power to govern. Though the journey towards democratic consolidation has been marked by significant progress and persistent challenges; nevertheless, the prospects for democratisation in the region is more than ever before. Democratic forces in

the past couple of years have almost unexpectedly succeeded in their struggle and simultaneously the pressure for political legitimation of regime performance is progressively intensifying in the sub-continent

The transformation of authoritarian civil-military relations is, therefore, a key element of any regime transitioning from authoritarian to democratic rule. However, since the prerequisites of this transition are set by the military rulers from a position of strength, they often continue to exercise substantial control over the process and outcomes, and the armed forces retain their acquired entitlements. A successful democratic transition requires establishing functional institutions of civilian control over the military, which is especially difficult in countries with a strong legacy of militarism and where the military is able to secure political and institutional privileges. Overviewing the course of democratic history of the region, reveals that time and again, external actors like international organization, supranational association and regional powers have played a decisive role in crafting and bolstering the roadmap towards democratic transition and consolidation. But obviously it has failed to reap desired results.

With advent of the new millennium India emerged as political heavyweights, wielding momentous influence not only in their region but also on the international stage. Nonetheless the articulation and legitimisation of these interests are done through normative idiom and discourse; and consequently, India's repute as the largest and functional democracy has been well acknowledged worldwide. This had set the stage for India to play a decisive role in this regard. But historically, we have witnessed that, policy makers in India had been sceptical and consciously pursued a defensive policy in the matter of furthering the process of democratic consolidation. Only on the pretext of an improved relations with United States, India took few measures to consolidate and rather not promote democracy on the global arena. Primarily India's role in consolidation of democracy has largely been stirred by strategic and security interest and has been limited in its neighbourhood. Even though, New Delhi's global presence has augmented manifold in tandem with its rising ambitions, doubts have continued to persist about its ability to take the leadership role in its immediate neighbourhood. Therefore, this research work is an attempt to examine and analyses the challenges and possibilities of India to play a more decisive role in the context of recent changes.