Democracy's Heartland

Praise for the Book

'*Democracy's Heartland* stands out for its unique regional perspective and scholarly depth. It powerfully captures South Asia's democratic journey – including Bhutan's own unique transition – its challenges, aspirations and global relevance. A truly important work.' **– Tshering Tobgay, Prime Minister of Bhutan**

'With his unparalleled experience and knowledge of democratic processes, Dr Quraishi has written a book on democracy in South Asia that explains both the difficulties and the persistent attractions of and striving for democracy in the sub-continent. A must-read for South Asians and all those interested in the progress of democracy and human welfare. **– Shivshankar Menon, former National Security Advisor, India**

'There can be no one as qualified as Dr S.Y. Quraishi, a former Chief Election Commissioner of India, to offer a comprehensive study of democracy in South Asia. His unparalled scholarship and his experience in managing the most ambitious electoral exercise in India, shine through the pages of this remarkable book. *Democracy's Heartland* will serve as an indispensable reference work on the subject.' **– Shyam Saran, former Foreign Secretary, India**

'Rich in detail and regional wisdom, *Democracy's Heartland* skilfully examines the foundations and fault lines of South Asian democracies. Its insights echo Sri Lanka's democratic journey and make it a valuable addition to the discourse of our time.' **– Mahinda Deshapriya, former Chairman of the Election Commission of Sri Lanka**

'As Bhutan's first Chief Election Commissioner, I drew heavily on India's electoral model. *Democracy's Heartland* captures, with clarity and depth, the strengths and struggles of South Asia's democracies – insights that will resonate across the region. An essential read.' **– Dasho Kunzang Wangdi, former Chief Election Commissioner of Bhutan**

'Having seen the Maldives rise, falter and recover, I recognize in *Democracy's Heartland* a rare and timely work. Dr Quraishi distils South Asia's democratic

struggles and aspirations with insight that speaks directly to our own journey. **– Fuwad Thowfeek, former Chief Election Commissioner of the Maldives; Ambassador to Thailand**

'A deeply engaging and thoughtful study, *Democracy's Heartland* offers a unique insight into the electoral and democratic dynamics of South Asia. Its reflections echo Nepal's own democratic struggles and aspirations – making it an important work for scholars, practitioners and citizens alike.' – **Neel Kantha Uprety, former Chief Election Commissioner of Nepal**

'At a time when democracy in Bangladesh and across South Asia is under strain, Dr S.Y. Quraishi's *Democracy's Heartland* shines as a beacon of clarity and hope. His wisdom, drawn from deep experience, offers direction in an era of uncertainty. This book is not just timely – it's necessary.' **– Prof. Abed Ali, Chairman, Election Monitoring Forum, Bangladesh; Peace Ambassador (South Asia), United Nations Peace Ambassador Foundation**

'Too often, South Asian countries are viewed in isolation. S.Y. Quraishi breaks that mold with a sweeping, comparative exploration of democracy across the region. An essential resource for students, scholars and curious readers alike.' – **Milan Vaishnav, Director and Senior Fellow, South Asia Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace**

'At a time when the world watches with amazement at "mothers of parliaments" and "cradles of democracy" struggle to deliver the ideals of democracy in world of social media, it is important to hear from the part of the world which practices it at scales unimaginable to the Athenians. Conceived during Dr Quraishi's fellowship engagement at King's College London, Democracy's Heartland exemplifies scholarship that bridges theory and practice – and marks a shift perhaps in where the new inspiration for democratic ideals will come from. This text should appeal to scholars and students of political sciences and democracy, but should also capture the attention of engaged citizens all over.' – **Prof. Shitij Kapur, Vice-Chancellor and President, King's College London**

'Written by someone who has devoted a career to the service of democracy, *Democracy's Heartland* offers invaluable insight into the practice and future of democracy in South Asia. As Dr Quraishi eloquently argues, this is a region – home to 40 per cent of the world's democratic citizens – that is a crucible for the global future of democracy in an age of democratic backsliding.' **– Prof. Louise Tillin, Director, King's India Institute**

Democracy's Heartland

Inside the Battle for Power in South Asia

S.Y. Quraishi

juggernaut

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To those who lit the first spark –
FICCI and King's College London –
for believing in an idea before it became a book

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Acknowledgements

In 2015, Alwyn Didar Singh, the then secretary general of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI), extended a fellowship opportunity at King's College London, at its India Institute during a conversation at the Delhi Golf Club. The offer was generous and open-ended – I was to choose a topic of interest, conduct research at King's College, write a paper and deliver a few public lectures. I proposed 'Democracy and Electoral Challenges in South Asia' – a theme that Alwyn approved immediately, pending the concurrence of the India Institute. The Institute, under the leadership of Sunil Khilnani, welcomed the idea. While he initially suggested narrowing the scope to one or two countries, I felt a broader comparative approach would better reflect the region's complex democratic trajectories, about which very little is known. We agreed to focus on the eight countries of the SAARC region.

I owe special thanks to the FICCI and King's College London not just for their institutional support but for inspiring the very idea of this work. It is only fitting that this book is dedicated to them. I am especially grateful to Naina Lal Kidwai, the then president of the FICCI, for reposing her trust in me.

Though the original fellowship lasted just a couple of months, it planted the seed for this book. The research could not be completed within that time frame, but I returned with the conviction that the subject merited not merely an academic paper, but a full-length book.

The journey since then has been long and frequently interrupted. Over the years, I worked intermittently on the manuscript, assisted by a series of young and gifted research assistants. The delays were entirely mine – as I often redirected their efforts to support my newspaper columns and public commentary. Despite many promising starts, the

book remained unfinished. Nonetheless, I gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the many research assistants who worked with me over the years – Shruti Slaria, Shivanshi Asthana, Tripti Jain, Nikita Singh and Ushmayo Bhattacharya – and whose dedication, even when brief, helped shape this book.

The turning point came when Abhishek Matta, an Oxford-educated scholar of exceptional intellect and discipline, joined me. Abhishek brought structure, analytical clarity and unwavering focus to a project that had long remained scattered. Even though I could not shield him entirely from other assignments, he remained committed to the manuscript's completion. When I finally curtailed my media engagements to focus on the book, the end came into view. Without Abhishek's contributions, this book would likely still be a work in progress.

I am deeply grateful to Swati Chopra, editorial director at Juggernaut Books, who had previously published three of my books – *The Great March of Democracy*, *The Population Myth* and *India's Experiment with Democracy* – with Penguin and HarperCollins. Swati understands my writing rhythm and idiosyncrasies better than most, making the publishing process refreshingly smooth. I was delighted when she offered to publish this volume at Juggernaut. My thanks to the entire team at Juggernaut Books for embracing the book.

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Above all, I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to my wife, Ila Sharma, former election commissioner of Nepal (2013–19). Her professional journey has paralleled mine in uncanny ways. Her perspective – both as a South Asian election official and a thoughtful observer – has enriched this project immeasurably.

Finally, to you – the reader – thank you for picking up this book. It is your curiosity about democracy in South Asia that gives meaning to the years of work behind these pages. In a lighter vein, I commend your superb judgement in choosing it! I hope this labour of love informs, provokes and engages you in equal measure.

Foreword

Writing this foreword is an honor for me. The author of this book, Dr S.Y. Quraishi, is a man of integrity and wisdom, with a lifelong commitment to public service, and to the type of reasoned public debate that has become rare in our increasingly embittered democracies. Moreover, as a former Chief Election Commissioner of India, he is a towering figure in the electoral world. It was thus that I met him and came to admire him. I had the privilege of tapping into his profound knowledge of and commitment to democracy when he was part, for nearly a decade, of the International IDEA's Board of Advisers. The reverence for democratic institutions and values that he brought to our organization also infuses every page of this volume.

This assignment is also an honor because *Democracy's Heartland: Inside the Battle for Power in South Asia* is an important and timely book. As the author points out, South Asia has been unduly neglected in the literature on democratic development. I can attest to the fact that, for example, in the exceptionally prolific literature on democratic transitions in my part of the world, Latin America, one would be hard pressed to find any mention of the exceptionally rich, diverse, oscillating, often troubled, democratic experience of a region that today is home to one fourth of humanity, the world's largest democracy, and some of the most vibrant polities anywhere. It is remarkable that not even the improbable success of democracy in India, which harbours crucial lessons for other emerging democracies in the developing world, has been systematically interrogated in a comparative way.

This is the glaring gap in our knowledge that this book sets out to correct. Doing so is urgent for many reasons, not least the certainty that,

at a time of rapid geopolitical change, South Asia, and particularly India, is set to play a pivotal role in global affairs in the future. Like few other regions, South Asia today embodies the promise and perils of democracy in the world. As I write, two of the world's most promising, if uncertain, democratic turnarounds are taking place in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, while intense debates continue to rage about the recent trajectory of democratic institutions in India, a story with enormous potential implications for the global fate of democracy.

This book is kaleidoscopic in nature. It touches on the myriad issues that have defined the vastly divergent trajectory of democratic institutions in the eight South Asian countries, ranging from the vibrancy of democracy in India to the tragedy of state collapse in Afghanistan. Yet, if there is one theme that emerges from this complex picture, it is that of the limits of electoral democracy. Even in those cases where democracy has failed to gain a steady hold – Pakistan, Bangladesh, clearly Afghanistan – a lot of faith has been placed on the power of elections to singlehandedly make democracy blossom on barren land. Over the past several decades, both electoral practices and the prominent role of electoral authorities have been a persistent presence in nearly every country in South Asia, to a much greater extent than could be inferred from the region's checkered political history. The citizens' dogged demand for democratic elections is, no doubt, a piece of good news in South Asia. But the truth remains that this demand has, more often than not, ended in bitter disappointment. The region shows that democracy will live dangerously where ethnic and religious tensions, military influence, corruption, oligarchic political mores and, above all, widespread forms of social exclusion are left to fester. This is true even in India, where elections are truly awe-inspiring events, and adherence to foundational democratic values, like constitutionalism, is part of the national identity. Essential though they are, elections are merely the instant gratification element of democracy. Democracy's robustness, longevity and success require deeper and much longer commitments to the task of distributing power in society and keeping it accountable. Fidelity to a notion of limited political power, where the state's legitimate sphere of action is constrained by citizens' rights and the law, is the secret sauce of democratic success, if there's one. At their best, elections

can help a citizens' democracy to emerge over time, but they cannot singlehandedly bring it to life.

The reading of this book makes clear that South Asia is a good place to unpack the complex links between democracy and development, an issue that should be carefully considered by anyone involved in the endeavour of measuring democratic performance around the world, as International IDEA is. In this volume, Dr Quraishi emerges as a crucial voice in the defence of exercises to monitor democratic performance, albeit not in an uncritical way. I can attest to the impatience that I have encountered in some of my interlocutors in the developing world with regards to these global measuring exercises. While some of that impatience may well be self-serving, a lot of it points to legitimate questions. Should we measure the performance of democratic institutions in Sweden or Denmark with the same yardsticks as in Sri Lanka or Bangladesh, knowing the overwhelming pressures created by the need to respond to high levels of poverty and social exclusion? How can we make our notion of democracy, and our way to measure it, more sensitive to development pressures?

In my travels with International IDEA, including in South Asia, I've come across good and bad ways to think about the relationship between democracy and development. One bad way, for example, is to see the checks and balances at the heart of democracy as an encumbrance for development. Should developing countries be entitled to cut some corners in terms of individual rights as an acceptable price for collective wellbeing? Perhaps. But one should be aware that, sooner or later, that abstract principle leads to very thorny decisions. Should building an important dam entail the price of running roughshod over the rights of an indigenous community? Should the fight against rampant crime, even when welcomed by society, justify obliterating due process and habeas corpus for those apprehended by the authorities, as it is happening today in Nayib Bukele's El Salvador? There are no obvious answers to these questions. There is only the real danger that once a government starts playing fast and loose with individual or collective rights in the name of lofty objectives, citizens may well end up with a government that they cannot get rid of. Sooner or later, the degradation of the rule of law begets the degradation of the other foundational components of democracy, especially free and fair elections.

Yes, our methods to measure democratic performance should be sensitive to development imperatives. The obvious way to do this is by reminding ourselves of the indivisibility of the corpus of fundamental rights that are the lifeblood of citizenship and democracy. Our measurement tools should shed the presumption that they prize civil and political rights above everything. They should state, loud and clear, as we do at International IDEA, that access to and the protection of social, economic and cultural rights are just as important for democracy as the achievement of civil and political rights. We should also be less judgemental about the developing countries' *current level* of democratic performance and focus more on the *trends* evinced by their performance. Where a country stands in comparison to Sweden or Denmark should matter less than the direction in which it is moving. When we measure the quality of democracy, more patience and less finger-wagging is the way to go. After all, it took the United States two centuries to grant full access to civil and political rights to African Americans, and nine centuries for Europe to move from a parliament of nobles to one elected by universal suffrage. These things take time.

Today there are legitimate concerns about the trends of democratic performance in South Asia, and Dr Quraishi pulls no punches about this. Yet, I also see grounds for optimism. The recent cases of Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, where two semi-authoritarian regimes were removed from power by large civic movements in which young people featured prominently, are signs that the demand for democracy remains vigorous in the region. At the same time, despite the real challenges to civil liberties and the breathless headlines of the past few years, the 2024 Indian election makes it is very difficult to claim now that the country is anything other than a solid democracy. The fact that in the world's most populous country, courts protected opposition leaders, electoral authorities went unperturbed about their tasks, citizens held the government to account and the results were accepted immediately by all political actors should count as a bright spot in an otherwise bleak global landscape.

And then there is the headway that South Asia is making when it comes to political inclusion. This I have witnessed directly. One of my most unforgettable memories of the past few years involves a meeting

in 2023 with a group of local women councillors in the outskirts of Janakpur, Nepal, who were part of one of International IDEA's programmes to make local governments more inclusive. Under a blazing sun, those impressive women proudly told me that their election had enabled them to refocus the priorities of their local council towards supporting education and preventing domestic violence, which we can safely assume would not be the priorities of a male-dominated council. That's what a citizens' democracy inching forward amidst immense challenges looks like.

I could go on sharing the many reflections elicited by this book. I could, for example, delve into the myriad proposals that Dr Quraishi puts forward in every chapter to bring South Asia closer to democracy's ideals. Moreover, I could unpack his very worthy proposal to create a Regional Forum for Strengthening Democracy in South Asia and Southeast Asia, as a venue for regional and international cooperation to support democracy. But I'll stop here. For now, it suffices to say that this is an indispensable volume for anyone who cares about South Asia or democracy. It is, simultaneously, a source of information on the recent political history of South Asia, a critical survey of the democratic trajectory of all the countries in the region, and an overview of how some of the key democratic challenges of our time manifest themselves in South Asia and what can be done about them. Most of all, this book is a kind of political testament that reveals its author's deep respect for democracy and, as the great Albert Hirschman would have it, his bias for hope. I cannot recommend this work enough, hoping that it will achieve the wide readership it deserves.

Dr Kevin Casas-Zamora
Secretary General, International IDEA
Stockholm, July 2025

Introduction

Reframing the Democratic Narrative in South Asia

A striking paradox in contemporary global discourse on democracy is the relative marginalization of South Asia as a collective democratic space. Despite the region encompassing nearly a quarter of the world's population and 40 per cent of the world's democracy, and also hosting some of the most complex and enduring democratic practices, it remains under-represented in comparative democratic scholarship. When South Asia is referenced, it is often through a narrow lens – centred almost exclusively on India. This tendency – while perhaps understandable given India's demographic magnitude, economic weight and geopolitical standing – has resulted in a lopsided portrayal of the region's political realities.

In numerous international conferences and academic forums – particularly in the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) – this imbalance has been palpable. Colleagues and participants from other South Asian nations, including Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives, have frequently expressed frustration at being relegated to the periphery of discussions ostensibly focused on the region as a whole. Their democratic trajectories, institutional innovations and political struggles are often overlooked or treated as secondary to the Indian experience. Even within Western universities that house departments of South Asian studies there exists a persistent institutional bias wherein research, syllabi and public engagement initiatives overwhelmingly centre on India. This intellectual asymmetry

distorts our understanding of South Asia's democratic landscape, and risks reinforcing simplistic narratives that fail to capture the region's rich political diversity.

This book is, in part, a response to that gap. It seeks to broaden the analytical frame and contribute to a more inclusive and balanced discourse on democracy in South Asia. By examining the political developments, electoral processes, institutional challenges and civic engagements across all South Asian countries, the book aims to illuminate the region's democratic pluralism. Each country's experience offers unique insights into the possibilities and perils of democratization in postcolonial, multi-ethnic and often economically constrained contexts.

In reframing the narrative, the objective is not to diminish India's significance, but rather to situate it within a broader regional context – one that recognizes the interdependencies, contrasts and shared challenges that define South Asia's political fabric. Ultimately, the aim is to foster a more equitable and nuanced understanding of the region's democratic evolution, and to highlight voices and experiences that have too often been sidelined in global and regional analyses.

South Asia, a region encompassing just eight countries – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka – is home to nearly 2 billion people. Collectively, these nations constitute the largest and most dynamic hub of democratic life on the planet. Despite this astonishing demographic and political significance, the region not only remains underappreciated in global discourses on democracy but is also especially under-supported by Western powers and international funding agencies that otherwise advocate the global promotion of democratic values.

What has been missing is an intentional, long-term investment in democratic deepening and institutional strengthening in the region. This oversight is particularly troubling at a time when authoritarianism is not only resurging but becoming increasingly exportable. China, South Asia's powerful neighbour, has systematically offered an alternative political model – centred on state-led capitalism, surveillance governance and political centralization – that poses a direct ideological and economic challenge to democracy. In contrast, South Asia, with all its democratic deficits, still embodies the idea that pluralism and representation

are possible even in conditions of poverty, inequality and deep social diversity. By investing in the resilience of South Asian democracies, the global community would not simply aid regional stability, it would also shore up a vital bulwark against the spread of authoritarian governance and defend the normative space for democratic experimentation outside the Western context.

The idea for this book emerged from the recognition of this paradox: South Asia, though often marginalized in global narratives about democratic progress and innovation, offers one of the richest, most diverse and most instructive labouratories for democratic practice anywhere in the world. Across its many linguistic, religious, ethnic and political landscapes, democracy in South Asia has been remarkably resilient, even if often contested, fragile or incomplete.

While the literature on democratic backsliding in the West is expanding rapidly, and while Eastern Europe, Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa receive sustained scholarly and institutional attention, South Asia's vibrant democratic cultures are either misunderstood or reduced to simplistic binaries – fragile or flawed, resilient or chaotic – besides being India-centric. These narratives fail to grasp the region's remarkable democratic endurance and its unique contributions to the global evolution of participatory governance. However, these complex and layered democratic processes are rarely the focus of international funding agencies or Western research institutions.

The bulk of global democracy assistance bypasses South Asia or remains narrowly focused on issues like election observation, legal reform or women's empowerment, in isolation from broader political ecosystems. South Asian democracies are often expected to follow the rules and standards set by Western democracies, but without the kind of funding, support or guidance that helped many of those countries build their systems in the first place.

This underinvestment is shortsighted. The democratic future of nearly 2 billion people – and with it the stability and moral authority of the global democratic project – cannot be taken for granted. South Asia is too significant to be ignored, too diverse to be flattened and too instructive to be overlooked. Its experiments with federalism, affirmative action, caste and gender representation, youth voting, and

digital campaigning offer lessons that extend well beyond the region. Its challenges – majoritarianism, populism, democratic backsliding and identity politics, among others – mirror those of established democracies, albeit under different conditions.

This is also a book that insists on hope. Despite myriad challenges – from entrenched patriarchy to deep economic inequality, from religious polarization to institutional weakness – people across South Asia continue to place their faith in the promise of democracy. They vote in enormous numbers, hold their governments to account, challenge exclusionary norms, and demand dignity and justice. This persistent democratic energy, especially in the face of adversity, is perhaps South Asia's greatest gift to the world.

Why a Book on South Asia?

No other region on earth hosts such a vast and diverse democratic public. Whether democracy retains its global relevance, or recedes into a Western and elite preoccupation, depends significantly on the trajectories unfolding in South Asia.

However, South Asia is not simply a statistical marvel. It is a living labouratory of democratic experiments where representation is tested amid poverty, pluralism and persistent institutional fragility. The region houses India – the world's largest democracy and the most populous country – and the Maldives, one of its smallest and most climate-vulnerable republics. It contains two nuclear powers (and a third in the form of China as an immediate neighbour), multiple secessionist movements, and a legacy of colonial extraction and partition that still shapes political contestations. Despite these fractures, South Asia is where hundreds of millions vote regularly, where constitutions are rewritten and debated in public squares, and where democratic backsliding sparks protest, litigation and resistance – not just acquiescence.

Its contradictions are dense. This is a region with the largest youth population in the world, yet also has the highest levels of youth unemployment.[1] It is where women turn out to vote in record numbers but rarely see proportional representation in parliaments.[2] It is where digital connectivity is rising sharply, even as Internet shutdowns are

normalized tools of state control.[3] The region's democratic potential is immense but so are its democratic tensions.

What makes South Asia globally consequential is not just its demographic scale or electoral frequency, but its democratic dilemmas that are writ large: Can democracy survive in conditions of economic inequality and cultural polarization? Can democratic institutions constrain executive power in fragile states? Can deeply hierarchical societies produce genuinely egalitarian political orders? These are not South Asian questions alone – they are global questions, and South Asia offers the most concentrated and consequential site of their contestations.

As 40 per cent of ballots cast globally over the next two decades will be from a South Asian voter, the democratic choices made here – by governments, courts, citizens and movements – will reverberate across international norms, alliances and expectations. A democratic reversal in this region would recalibrate global indices, embolden autocrats elsewhere and further fracture the post-war democratic consensus. Conversely, democratic renewal in South Asia could provide the most compelling proof that democracy remains viable, adaptive and morally necessary even under the most challenging conditions.

This book takes that challenge seriously. As discussed, it begins with the premise that South Asia is not peripheral to the global story of democracy – it is central to it. And therefore, to track its electoral systems, its institutional evolutions, its legal innovations and its civic movements is not merely a regional study but a global imperative.

Over the years, there have been some books that sought to address the region of South Asia as a whole, most importantly, Susan Wadley's *South Asia in the World*[4] and Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal's *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy*[5]. Even if there are some convergences I share with these books, there are, nonetheless, very marked divergences in methodology, approach, scope and style.

Ultimately, the key divergence between the three volumes lies primarily in their disciplinary orientation and methodological approach. Wadley's volume adopts an ethnographic, micro-level methodology, grounded in localized case studies and detailed cultural narratives. Bose and Jalal's volume takes on a historical and political account but is mostly restricted to the region of the Indian subcontinent. In contrast,

my book takes a distinctly comparative and institutionally oriented approach, characterized by systematic political analysis structured around democratic governance, electoral integrity and policy-oriented assessments.

Wadley's book delves into selected cultural and social phenomena through illustrative ethnographic vignettes – such as marriage customs in South India, transgender activism in Pakistan or forest management practices in Rajasthan – highlighting localized intricacies and social dynamics. In sharp contrast, my methodological strategy systematically encompasses every single South Asian country individually – India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives – in dedicated country profiles – a comprehensive coverage often absent in broader regional analyses, including Wadley's and Bose and Jalal's. Moreover, the thematic sections in this book offer rigorous comparative insights across these countries on key governance-related issues such as political financing, voter education, electoral technologies and inner-party democracy, providing readers with region-wide analytical depth rarely achieved in existing literature on South Asia.

In contrast to both the books, moreover, the aim of this book is to deliver comprehensive, comparative political analysis and concrete proposals aimed explicitly at institutional and electoral reform.

How Have the Member Countries Fared?

India, the largest democracy in the world by population, held its first general elections in 1951–52, defying contemporary Western scepticism about the viability of liberal democracy in a poor, largely illiterate and highly diverse post-colonial state. Bangladesh, also born out of a liberation struggle, has oscillated between democratic and authoritarian governance but has seen robust voter participation and a unique pattern of female leadership. Nepal has made a remarkable transition from monarchy to federal democracy, while Pakistan continues to negotiate the role of civilian governance in the face of entrenched military influence. Afghanistan has struggled to build a democratic state amid persistent conflict, while Sri Lanka, Bhutan and the Maldives each present distinct democratic stories marked by both innovation and instability.

What binds these disparate trajectories together is not a uniform commitment by governments, but a deeper, more enduring belief among the people of South Asia in the promise of democracy. Across regimes that have veered between authoritarianism and electoralism – whether in the shadow of the Taliban in Afghanistan, under military tutelage in Pakistan or through volatile transitions in the Maldives – the popular desire for electoral legitimacy, constitutional rule and accountable governance has remained strikingly resilient. This persistent civic aspiration – forged despite poverty, inequality, sectarian violence and political repression – merits not only sustained scholarly attention but also genuine international solidarity and support.

Yet, South Asia has long remained peripheral in the eyes of Western donors, multilateral institutions and democracy-promotion foundations. The bulk of democracy assistance funding and academic attention continues to be directed toward Eastern Europe, Latin America and parts of Africa. South Asia is often viewed through a narrow security or development lens, with democracy being treated as either a backdrop or a collateral concern. This persistent underinvestment reflects a larger failure to appreciate the region's critical role in shaping the future of democratic norms and practices globally.

There are structural and ideological reasons behind this neglect. For one, the region's democratic evolution does not fit neatly into Western models. South Asian democracies are often noisy, turbulent and unpredictable. Their institutions are sometimes weak; corruption is endemic; and majoritarianism, clientelism and populism remain persistent challenges. However, these characteristics are not unique to South Asia – they are increasingly visible in the democracies of the West as well. The reluctance to treat South Asia as a legitimate site of democratic experimentation reveals a lingering bias that equates democracy with Western political genealogy and institutional design.

Moreover, South Asian democracies have often crafted indigenous frameworks of democratic functioning that prioritize participation, inclusion and negotiation over procedural orthodoxy. The region has pioneered models such as caste-based reservations, *panchayati raj* institutions, decentralized governance, public interest litigation and gender quotas in local elections – innovations that offer valuable lessons

for democratic deepening in other parts of the world. South Asia also offers a striking diversity of electoral systems, federal arrangements, civil society formations and media ecologies, providing a rich terrain for comparative analysis among these issues.

This book seeks to respond to this gap in scholarly and policy attention. It brings together thematically structured essays that analyse key pillars of democratic life in South Asia: electoral systems and representation, political finance, gender and inclusion, criminalization of politics, status of religious and ethnic minorities, civil society and youth involvement, judicial independence, executive–legislative relations, and the general trend of democratic backsliding in the region. It features critical assessments of constitutional frameworks, legal innovations, voter behaviour, identity politics, and the role of religion and ethnicity in shaping democratic participation. Throughout, the book foregrounds the lived realities of democracy in South Asia, combining rigorous empirical research with normative reflections.

The SAARC – The Regional Dream That Faltered

No serious study of democracy in South Asia can afford to ignore the institutional framework that was envisioned to bind its nations together: the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The SAARC emerged in 1985 as a formal attempt to realize the promise of regionalism.[6] Modelled loosely after other regional blocs such as ASEAN and the European Union (EU), it was born out of a recognition that South Asia's shared history, porous borders and interlinked socio-economic challenges required collective solutions, not merely national ones.[7]

The official declaration that led to the SAARC's formation came in December 1985 in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The seven founding countries – Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka (later joined by Afghanistan in 2007) – adopted the SAARC Charter with ambitions that were as lofty as they were necessary: to promote peace, stability and prosperity through regional cooperation.[8] They pledged to collabourate on issues ranging from poverty alleviation to education, from health to environmental sustainability, and from cultural

exchange to economic integration. Crucially, the SAARC Charter avoided addressing bilateral disputes, in particular the India–Pakistan rivalry, in the hope that political disagreements would not derail the developmental agenda.[9]

Despite this high-minded vision, the SAARC was constrained from the outset by the very geopolitical realities it sought to transcend. The region's asymmetrical power distribution, particularly India's outsized economic and political dominance – accounting for over 70 per cent of SAARC's GDP – generated suspicion among its smaller neighbours.[10] Moreover, the adversarial relationship between India and Pakistan has proven to be a chronic roadblock. Their animosities have not only poisoned bilateral relations but also repeatedly stymied the SAARC's potential as a collective platform. The last SAARC summit was held in Kathmandu in 2014. Since then, summits have been indefinitely postponed, most notably following the 2016 Uri attack and India's subsequent boycott of the Islamabad summit.

And yet, the SAARC was not without its achievements. It facilitated the establishment of institutions like the SAARC Development Fund, the South Asian University and the SAARC Disaster Management Centre. It catalysed initiatives on women's empowerment, child health and food security. Its conventions on combating terrorism and drug trafficking, while limited in enforcement, laid down common legal frameworks.[11] The South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), though poorly implemented, represented a step toward economic integration. Still, these victories were sporadic and largely symbolic. Intraregional trade continues to hover around a mere 5 per cent, a dismal figure when compared to ASEAN's 25 per cent.[12] Visa regimes remain restrictive, cultural exchange is minimal and the organization suffers from weak institutional architecture, lacking both the political will and the bureaucratic capacity to enforce its mandates.

The broader tragedy of the SAARC lies not just in its ineffectiveness, but in its missed opportunity. The region's most urgent problems – climate change, health pandemics, energy insecurity, youth unemployment and digital misinformation – are transnational in character and cannot be addressed by states acting in isolation.[13] The SAARC was envisioned to provide precisely this kind of regional scaffolding. Its failure to do

so has left a vacuum now increasingly filled by bilateral tensions and extra-regional powers.[14] Yet, paradoxically, this very failure underscores its necessity. If democracy is to be revitalized in South Asia, it will require not only national reforms but also renewed regional cooperation. A reimagined SAARC – one that is depoliticized, people-centric and democratically accountable – may yet serve as the platform for such a future.

In what follows, this book turns to the contemporary state of democracy in the SAARC countries – measured, compared and critiqued through the lens of global democratic indices. But it does so with the understanding that South Asia is more than a sum of its parts. Its democratic journey must be understood in concert, not isolation.

Witnessing Democracies: A Comparative Global Vantage

Over the past several years, my work in the domain of electoral democracy has taken me across borders – from the snow-lined polling booths of Nepal to the rural heartlands of Pakistan, from election headquarters in Colombo to civic forums in Nairobi, Maputo and Abuja. I have served as an election observer not only within the South Asian region, but also in democracies as varied as Kenya and Nigeria, Mozambique, and the UK. These experiences have offered more than institutional insight; they have been encounters with the plural textures of democratic life: the quiet dignity of first-time voters, the logistical choreography of large-scale electoral machinery and the political undercurrents that shape how citizens trust, fear or challenge the ballot. Each country offered its own answer to the democratic question, and cumulatively, these journeys endowed me with a comparative lens through which to examine South Asia's electoral landscape – not as an isolated case, but as part of a global continuum of aspiration and contestation.

This book, while centred on the SAARC region, is profoundly shaped by those broader observations. The comparative vantage has allowed me to see more clearly what is exceptional, endangered or instructive about democracy in South Asia. Why do countries with similar colonial legacies diverge so radically in democratic endurance?

Why do some electoral commissions win the public's trust while others remain beholden to power? Why do youth rise up in protest in one context and retreat into apathy in another? My visits to countries across Africa, Europe and North America were not digressions from a South Asian inquiry – they were prisms that refracted its complexity. This book, then, is both regional in its scope and global in its sensibility, grounded in the belief that to understand democracy in South Asia is also to engage with democracy everywhere – as a promise, a process and a struggle still unfolding.

Fieldnotes from the Frontlines: Sri Lanka and Pakistan

One of the most vivid memories I carry from my years observing elections across the region is from Sri Lanka in November 2015. It was a country still walking the tightrope between past authoritarianism and future possibility. I had been invited to lead a delegation of twenty-three members from the Association of Asian Election Authorities (AAEA), and over four days, I travelled more than 1,200 km through former war-torn provinces in the north, from Jaffna to Mullaitivu, watching the machinery of democracy click, creak and somehow function.

At the time, Sri Lanka's election commission had technically been abolished as an independent constitutional body, reduced to a mere government department, that too under a dictator. And yet, its commissioner, Mahinda Deshapriya, refused to let that institutional weakening paralyse the conduct of the vote. Civil society groups like People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL) and Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) were loud, organized and fearless. Rumours of military roadblocks and voter intimidation circulated widely. But on polling day, not a single army checkpoint blocked our path. 'Send the maximum number of observers to the north,' Deshapriya had urged me days earlier, almost pleading. I now believe that our presence – especially in areas most vulnerable to voter suppression – may have altered the script through voter confidence.

The most unforgettable moment came just hours after the polls closed. As results were being declared live on national television, Deshapriya stood beside the incoming president and prime minister (PM), holding up my book *An Undocumented Wonder: The Making of the Great Indian*

Election. He quoted Gopal Gandhi's line from the foreword of the book – 'Among the many great things that India has, three are most important: the Taj Mahal, Mahatma Gandhi, and an electoral democracy' – and said he hoped Sri Lanka might one day match India not only in holding elections, but in empowering the institutions that safeguard them. It was a moving moment, not for personal reasons alone but because it reminded me that the Indian electoral model, despite its many flaws, still held aspirational power across the region.

The results themselves were dramatic: the powerful Rajapaksa political dynasty was defeated by Maithripala Sirisena, a former ally turned challenger. It was one of those rare transitions in South Asia where an entrenched regime was unseated not by revolution or collapse, but through the silent will of the ballot. In hindsight, that election became a test case in this book's central concern with how electoral institutions, when bolstered by civic vigilance and international observation, can restrain majoritarianism and restore credibility even in post-conflict, illiberal contexts. For our broader reflections on civil–military relations, electoral oversight and the reconstruction of institutional legitimacy across the SAARC countries, Sri Lanka's 2015 moment remains an enduring and instructive case.

Later, I was in Pakistan for the 2018 general elections, this time as a member of the Commonwealth Observer Group led by Nigeria's former head General Abdulsalami Abubakar. It was a historic moment – the second time in Pakistan's turbulent history that a civilian government handed over to another civilian government after completing a full term. But even as the handover looked smooth on paper, the air in Islamabad and Lahore was thick with euphemism. No one mentioned the army directly. Instead, people spoke of the 'establishment', the '*khalai makhlooq* (people from space)', the 'angels' and even the 'agriculture department'. There were murmurs of journalists being silenced, party candidates pressured to withdraw and court cases timed with uncanny precision. When we met media professionals, one of them shrugged and said, 'We have learnt how to censor ourselves. It's safer.'

And yet, as the days unfolded, we saw another side of the picture: women voting in tribal areas for the first time, thanks to a new rule that invalidated any result where less than 10 per cent of female voters turned out. Political parties ran special enrolment drives. Women-only

polling stations – staffed entirely by women – popped up even in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Despite real threats in places like Balochistan, the day itself passed peacefully. The Election Commission of Pakistan had more power than ever before: to discipline officials, to make rule and to deregister political parties. But it still struggled with transparency, especially during the counting, when result forms weren't distributed or pasted publicly. Even the result transmission system collapsed. One minister quipped, 'Blame the British. Their app failed.'

The results, which saw Imran Khan's PTI (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf) sweep into power, were met with celebration by some and with deep suspicion by others. And that ambiguity – between democratic advance and democratic manipulation – is, in some ways, quintessentially South Asian. Pakistan's 2018 election illustrated both the strides and limits of reform: a legal framework stronger than ever, but still vulnerable to extra-electoral influence. What it taught me – and what this book takes seriously – is that in many SAARC countries, democratic transitions are not always about clean breaks or grand moments of rupture. They are more often about slow, uneven shifts where legal reform jostles with latent power, where electoral commissions may grow sharper teeth but still lack the bite, and where civil society becomes the buffer between what is promised and what is practised.

Nepal and Myanmar: Between Blueprint and Reality

If Sri Lanka's 2015 polls offered a lesson in how democratic institutions can reassert themselves after institutional erosion, then Nepal's elections in late 2017 gave a glimpse into what it looks like when a fledgling democratic order begins to breathe on its own. I was in Kathmandu during the final phase of voting as part of an observer delegation drawn from across South Asia. What I witnessed was not just an election but a kind of civic rite – calm, orderly and quietly determined. After years of political volatility, street agitation and constitutional wrangling, Nepal was conducting simultaneous elections to both the federal parliament and the newly created provincial assemblies under the 2015 Constitution. That this was the country's second major election in just seven months (the earlier being for local governments) spoke to an electoral machinery that, though still young, had begun to find its rhythm.

I visited several polling booths in both urban and hilly areas. There were no frills, no loudspeakers or garlands or processionals, just long queues of voters – many elderly, many first-timers – waiting with stoic patience. Despite high rates of illiteracy, voters had little difficulty handling multiple ballot papers, thanks to a modest but effective voter education campaign. In one village, I watched an old man leaning on a stick, carefully inspect all three ballots – the FPTP (first-past-the-post) system and proportional representation papers for both tiers – and then slip them into separate boxes with deliberation. The symbolism was hard to miss: a fractured, post-conflict society trying to stitch itself together through the act of voting.

That Nepal's voters were able to embrace a complex new system – combining direct and proportional representation – suggests a degree of democratic maturity often overlooked in regional assessments. The Left alliance, which went on to sweep the polls, campaigned on promises of stability and economic revival. Whether it delivered on those promises is a question that continues to animate political debate in Nepal. But for this book's purposes, Nepal's 2017 election is important for another reason: it reflects the promise and pitfalls of federalism in South Asia, where newly devolved structures coexist with unresolved ethnic and regional tensions. Madhesi protests, the ambiguity over provincial boundaries and the still-unformed National Assembly all point to the fragility of what has been achieved. Yet, it also shows how the electoral process itself – if credible and inclusive – can serve as a slow, imperfect blueprint for peace-building in deeply plural societies.

From Nepal's hopeful ballot to Myanmar's (previously Burma) fraught one, the arc of the region bends unevenly. I travelled to Yangon in late 2015 to observe what was then being hailed as Myanmar's first truly open national election in decades. On paper, the enthusiasm was palpable: over 6,000 candidates from ninety-one parties, 40,000 polling booths, and a swelling wave of expectation surrounding Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD). But the optimism was laced with unease. At one meeting, a local activist told me, 'We're voting under the shadow of ghosts,' – referring to the country's long history of military surveillance, voter suppression and ethnic exclusion. The Election Commission itself had admitted it could only vouch for 30