CHAPTER-1

INTRODUCTION: ROLE OF ELECTIONS IN DEMOCRACIES
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SOUTH ASIA
Introduction

Elections are a fundamental and distinguishing characteristic of states that would normally be described as democratic. A democratic government is one which entitle people's participation in the political process. It is through elections that people participate directly in the political process and hold governments accountable.\(^1\) Elections thus play a central role in realising the objectives of democracy. In South Asia, the role of election varies from one country to another. In India and Sri Lanka elections have played a central role in the political process. But in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Maldives and Bhutan, its role has been limited to the periphery. However, except Maldives and Bhutan all the other countries in this region are now full-fledged democracies with elections playing a central role in their political process. An attempt would be made in this chapter to examine democratic experiments and the role of elections in South Asia.

Democracy and Elections: General Perspective

The term democracy means rule by the people. Democracy

seeks its origin from the clashes between the common man and the aristocracy or between the poor and the rich which could be traced back to 594 B.C.\textsuperscript{2} But according to Ernest Weekly, "it was only after the French revolution that democracy became a part of the political vocabulary and ceased to be a mere literary word."\textsuperscript{3} The emergence of new doctrines such as legitimacy, contract, and representation in the eighteenth century that provided guidelines to modern democracy. The doctrine of legitimacy made a government dependent on the consent of the governed which led to the conclusion that legitimate power emerged only from the people. While the doctrine of contract attributed legitimate rights to the people, it also emphasised that protection of these rights was the responsibility of the government. The doctrines of representation asserted that each individual was entitled to speak for himself.\textsuperscript{4}

The literary meaning of democracy, rule by the people,

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\textsuperscript{3} ibid., p.38.

has always been a contested idea. In fact, the term democracy came in for a lot of criticism by Ancient philosophers like Plato, Socrates and Aristotle. Plato regarded democracy as 'aggressive and unstable and likely to lead to tyranny'. However, Aristotle, after distinguishing several kinds of democracy, came to the conclusion that 'a system which does not allow every citizen to share is oligarchical and one that does so is democratic'. Democracy has had a very different meaning and connotation from Athenian city-state to the present day. Under the classical Athenian democracy people governed themselves directly by rotating the governing offices among the citizens. It should, however, be noted that in the Athenian city-state the population was small enough to enable all the people to gain an opportunity to participate in the governing process at one time or another. The same is not possible in the present context of large-scale modern states. As James Schumpeter stated, "the classical ideal

5. Anthony Arblaster, n.3, p. 16.
government by the people was not only impossible but also undesirable on account of proven ignorance, irrationality and apathy of the people. The proper role of the people was to choose their rulers through competitive election".9 The intention was that the people should elect as their representatives those they consider would understand nation's interests better than themselves.10 Thus, in the present context, democracy means not the rule by the people but by the representatives of the people whom they elect on the basis of free and fair elections.

However, in the wider sense both the classical model of direct democracy and the contemporary model of representative democracy is more or less inter-related. The core-value of both these models are 'accountable rule'.11 Though both these models differ in the way they set out to achieve this, representative democracy could be seen as an expanded form of the classical model particularly towards

10. Anthony Arblaster, n.3, p.41.
the realities of modern social changes.\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{Theoretical Observation}

A number of theoretical attempts have been made by various scholars on the feasibility and sustenance of democracy. A number of conditions were put forward for democracy to exist including stable economic growth coupled with a high level of literacy and communication, a vibrant civil society with relatively limited form of material and social inequality.\textsuperscript{13} As S.M. Lipset stated, "the more well-to-do a nation the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy."\textsuperscript{14} It is considered that a high rate of growth in the economic front could lead to the emergence and maintenance of democratic institutions in the newly independent countries.\textsuperscript{15} It is also argued that the premature introduction of democracy would in fact hamper

\textsuperscript{12} For more details on representative democracy, its evolution and its basic features see Robert Pinkney, Democracy in the Third World, (Philadelphia, 1993).


economic development. At the same time Deane Neubauer was of the view that though certain levels of socio-economic development may be necessary to sustain a democracy, it could not be related with the functioning of democratic institutions.

Role of Elections

As mentioned earlier, elections play a central role in the functioning of democratic institutions, which enable the people's participation in the governing process. Under the classical model of direct democracy, the people of Athens selected many among themselves through a system of lots for a limited period of one year to govern the state. In the contemporary world, people choose their representatives by means of election. The representatives are elected by the people for a limited period and when that period is over elections are held once again to choose the new rulers. As J.S. Mill stated, "the sanction of frequent elections is the check which the people have over their representatives, while the representatives themselves must have the power to check the executive through which the interests of the

18. Ruth H. Wagner and Ivah E. Green, n.8, p.18.
governors and the governed could be brought in to accord."\textsuperscript{19}

However, not all elections held in the contemporary world are competitive and can be termed as democratic. There are elections that are non-competitive such as acclamatory elections and candidate-choice elections which was mostly practised in the erstwhile Soviet Union and in the former Eastern European countries.\textsuperscript{20} On democratic elections, David Butler has suggested the following criteria: (1) all adults have the right to vote; (2) regular elections occur within prescribed time limits; (3) all the seats in the legislature are subject to election and are usually contested; (4) no substantial group is denied the opportunity of forming a party and putting forward candidates; (5) the electoral administration must be reasonably fair, neither law, nor violence or intimidation should bar candidates from presenting views or voters from discussing them; (6) votes should be cast freely and secretly, counted and reported honestly and converted into legislative seats as prescribed by law; (7) those elected should be installed in office and remain in office until

\textsuperscript{19} Quoted in Anthony Arblaster, n.3, p.46.

their terms expire or a new elections is held. 21

This could be compared with MecKenzie's four ideal conditions that were considered necessary for free elections. They were: (1) an independent judiciary to interpret electoral law; (2) an honest, competent, non-partisan administration to run elections; (3) a developed system of political parties, efficiently organised to put their policies, traditions and teams of candidates before the electors; (4) a general acceptance throughout the political community of certain rather vague rules of the game. 22 From the above set of conditions and criteria, a democratic election could be defined as one in which political parties compete for power for a limited period under a free and fair atmosphere without violating the prescribed set of rules and the people are provided with an alternative choice between the parties and the outcome is generally accepted by all.

The role of election and its functions tremendously vary from one political system to another. While election plays a central role in democracy, its role is minimized in


other political systems, where the outcome of the elections are pre-determined.\textsuperscript{23} In democracy, elections function as devices for legitimacy, identification, integration, communication, participation, socialization and, more importantly, for political choice and political control.\textsuperscript{24} While it confers legitimate authority on an elected government, it also enables the peaceful transfer of power from the defeated to the victorious party. Elections also provide valuable indicators of social and political change. It reveals how far the society is willing to tolerate disagreement and dissent.\textsuperscript{25}

**Democracy and Elections in South Asia**

In South Asia, democratic experiments significantly vary from one country to another. Among the seven countries of South Asia, India and Sri Lanka have emerged as stable democracies. As Robert Dahl stated "stable democracy could be possible when competitive politics first develops among a small elite before enabling the mass political participation." His conclusion was that "stable democracy could be possible only by a slow evolutionary process than

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\item \textsuperscript{23} Dennis Kavanagh, "Elections", in Jessica Kuper, n.6, p. 57.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Martin Harrop and William L. Miller, n.20, p.10.
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the revolutionary overthrow of an authoritarian regime."26
It was true in the case of India and Sri Lanka whose elites
had political training in the democratic governing process
under the British. This enabled them to guide their
respective countries towards a stable democracy after
independence.27

However, in the case of Pakistan, which was part of
British India until its independence, and whose elites also
had political training like their counterparts, a stable
democracy was not established. This could be attributed
mainly to a lack of consensus among the political elite and
their hunger for power.28 The same problem was also faced by
Bangladesh which was a part of Pakistan until its emergence
as a sovereign independent country in 1971. Consequently,
both Pakistan and Bangladesh wavered between democratic
polity and authoritarianism. The situation was entirely
different in the case of Nepal where the struggle was
between monarchy and democracy. After their prolonged
struggle, the political elite succeeded in establishing a

26. Robert A. Dahl, Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition,

27. Larry Diamond, "Introduction: Persistence, Erosion,
Breakdown and Renewal", in Larry Diamond, J.J. Linz and
S.M. Lipset, eds., Democracy in Asia, (New Delhi,

28. ibid., p. 6.
democratic government. The political systems in Bhutan and Maldives could be termed as nascent democracies. While Bhutan is headed by a constitutional monarch, Maldives is ruled by a powerful elected President.

Many scholars predicted that India would disintegrate because of its large population, ethnic and religious diversity, and slow progress of its economy. But India withstood all these drawbacks and has emerged as the largest democracy in the world. There are a number of factors that could be attributed to India's survival as a democratic country. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, the evolution of democracy in India was gradual and its political elite had sufficient training in the governing process under the British before they started governing on their own. Secondly, the transfer of power to this elite has led to the continuity in the governing process. Thirdly, this elite was provided with the required institutional infrastructure and a professional bureaucratic system which was already

29. For more details on Bhutan see Parmanand, The Politics of Bhutan: Retrospect and Prospect, (Delhi, 1992).

30. For more details on Maldives see Urmila Phadnis and B.D. Luithui, Maldives: Winds of Change in an Atoll State, (New Delhi, 1985).

occupied mostly by Indians and could be expanded according to the requirements.\textsuperscript{32} Lastly and more importantly, a strong political organization, the Indian National Congress was at their disposal with its support base spreading all over the country and accommodating major political segments of the population representing diverse occupational groups.\textsuperscript{33}

Aided by these factors the political elite went on to establish a parliamentary form of government and framed a well-structured constitution according to the requirements of the system. Elections were held periodically to enable the people to choose their representatives. Since its first general elections in 1952, elections have been held every five years except for a short break between 1975 to 1977.\textsuperscript{34} Democracy faced a severe setback in these two years because of the emergency that was imposed by Prime Minister Indira

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\textsuperscript{32} ibid., p.67.
\textsuperscript{33} ibid., p.67. For more details on the Indian National Congress see O.M.P. Gautam, \textit{The Indian National Congress: An Analytical Biography}, (Delhi, 1985), and Ram Joshi and R.K Hebsur, \textit{Congress in Indian Politics: A Centenary Perspective}, (Bombay, 1987).
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Gandhi.\textsuperscript{35} However, when elections were held in 1977, the people gave a befitting reply by defeating the Congress Party. This led to a transfer of power for the first time to the victorious Janata Party.\textsuperscript{36} Until 1989, power has been transferred on three occasions from the ruling party to the opposition.

Unlike India, Pakistan repeatedly failed in its attempt to establish a stable democratic government. While it took nearly a decade to frame a constitution for the independent Pakistan, it took twenty-four years to conduct a nation-wide general elections on the basis of universal franchise. Though elections were held before 1970 on the basis of universal franchise, it was restricted only to provincial assemblies and local councils. Hence, elections never played a central role in the political process of Pakistan until 1970.

This could be attributed to a number of factors. Firstly and more importantly, unlike the Indian National Congress, the Muslim League failed to incorporate the


diverse sections under its umbrella.\textsuperscript{37} Its organizational machinery was weakest especially in those areas which became a part of Pakistan.\textsuperscript{38} It was evident from the provincial assembly elections that were held in the first half of 1950's. Though the Muslim League won a comfortable majority in Punjab, North-West Frontier and Sind provinces, it was virtually wiped out in East Pakistan whose population amounted to more than half of Pakistan's national population. While the main opposition, the United Front, secured 223 out of 237 Muslim seats, the Muslim League obtained only ten seats. This contributed to the decline of the Muslim League as a major political force.\textsuperscript{39} Hence the failure of the Muslim League to emerge as a unifying force plunged Pakistan into factionalised politics.

Secondly, the sudden death of charismatic leaders like M.A. Jinnah and Liaqat Ali Khan, who could have pulled Pakistan out of its initial hurdles, created a vacuum in

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Pakistan's politics. The absence of an eminent political leadership, coupled with the factionalised political groups which failed to resolve their differences through consensus, eroded the prospects of establishing a democratic government. This was well exploited by the non-elected institutions like the bureaucracy and the military. These institutions established their dominance over the government in 1951 and since their position was not threatened by the existing democratic institutions, they continued to rule under the facade of parliamentary democracy. Once their position was at stake with the framing of the constitution in 1956 and the announcement of the first nationwide general elections for 1958, they led Pakistan into the first martial law regime under General Ayub Khan. The martial law regime abrogated the 1956 Constitution, dismissed the central and provincial governments, dissolved the national and provincial assemblies and banned political parties.

After General Ayub Khan established his control over

42. Ayesha Jalal, n.38, p.54.
the nation, he invented a unique system of "Basic Democracy" or guided democracy with the aim of legitimising his rule. Under this system, 80,000 (later increased to 1,20,000) basic democrats were to be elected at the local level on the basis of universal franchise. These basic democrats functioned as the electoral college to elect the President and the members of the National and Provincial Assemblies.\textsuperscript{44} On the basis of this system, 80,000 basic democrats were elected on a non-party basis in December 1959 and January 1960. They in turn in a referendum, endorsed General Ayub Khan as President for a five year term.\textsuperscript{45} On the basis of this, President Ayub Khan went on to frame a new constitution by incorporating the components of basic democracy which came into force on March 1962.\textsuperscript{46}

To further legitimise his rule, he lifted martial law and revoked the ban on political parties on the eve of the 1965 presidential election. He also contested the presidential election under a newly formed political party, the Pakistan Muslim League. The opposition, which came together in the name of Combined Opposition Party (COP),


\textsuperscript{45} Richard S. Wheeler, n.41, p.197.

\textsuperscript{46} For more details see Lawrence Ziring, n.44.
nominated Fatima Jinnah, sister of M.A. Jinnah. The newly
elected 80,000 basic democrats went to the polls to elect
the new President on January 2, 1965. The result gave
President Ayub Khan a comfortable victory. While he received
63.3 per cent of the votes, Fatima Jinnah secured 36.4 per
cent. 47 This was followed by elections to the national and
provincial assemblies. The Pakistan Muslim League obtained a
majority in both the national and provincial assemblies. 48
President Ayub Khan did not face any major challenge for
nearly a decade against his basic democracy system.
However, he was forced to resign on March, 1969 owing to
large scale protests which led Pakistan into a second
martial law regime. 49 Although the basic democracy system
under General Ayub Khan enabled only indirect election for
the presidency, national and provincial assemblies and being
far from free, it still contributed to the political
development. 50 While the elections at the local level
created political awareness among the people, 51 it also

48. For more details see K.P. Misra, M.V. Lakhi and V.
Narain, n.43.
49. Kausar Niazi, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto of Pakistan: The Last
51. ibid.
helped to maintain the momentum for the future democratic process.

The second martial law regime under General Yahya Khan was of a different kind. It paved the way for the first ever direct general elections on the basis of universal franchise. The contest was mainly between the two main political parties - the Awami League led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in East Pakistan and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) led by Z.A. Bhutto. The election was held successfully on 7 December 1970 and largely free and fair. The Awami League secured a simple majority without contesting even a single seat in West Pakistan. While Awami League won 160 out of 162 seats allotted to East Pakistan, the PPP won 83 out of 138 seats allotted to West Pakistan. The outcome of the election revealed the factionalised nature of the political parties and cleavage on the basis of regionalism. Once again the political leadership's failure to reach a consensus and the events that had followed resulted in a civil war. Subsequently, it led to the partition of Pakistan and the emergence of East Pakistan as Bangladesh.

52. ibid.

In West Pakistan, General Yahya Khan was forced to resign and power was handed over to a civilian leader Z.A. Bhutto, whose Pakistan People's Party won a majority of seats in the 1970 general elections.

A new Constitution was framed in 1973 which envisaged a British model of parliamentary democracy. Bhutto, who took over power as President became the Prime Minister under the new Constitution. However, Bhutto's government did not function in any way different from that of the martial law regimes of Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan. In the name of parliamentary democracy, Bhutto led a highly personalized and authoritarian system of government. He ruled more with the help of emergency regulations such as Defence of Pakistan Rules and Press Censorship laws. While the government banned the major opposition party, the National Awami Party, it also harassed, prosecuted and imprisoned its political opponents. As a result, the opposition largely boycotted the parliament.

The government's attitude forced the opposition from various backgrounds to come together to form a nine party


Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) on the eve of the 1977 general elections. This election which witnessed large scale rigging and violence gave Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party a comfortable majority. However, the opposition PNA accused the government of rigging the election and refused to accept the results. Moreover, the opposition went on to organize anti-government agitations which paralyzed the whole nation. Significantly, at this moment of crisis, the Army played a cautious role by bringing the government and the opposition to the negotiating table. But both these groups failed to come to an understanding which led to the third martial law regime in Pakistan under General Zia-ul-Haq.

Though Zia took over power by promising general elections within a year, he never did until 1985. Even the election that was held in 1985 on a non-party basis and his subsequent promise of general elections in 1988 on the basis of Parliamentary democracy was due to the nationwide protest by the opposition parties which came together in the name of "Movement for Restoration of Democracy" (MRD). But it was the sudden death of Zia that led Pakistan to revive

56. ibid.
57. ibid.
itself as a democratic country.\textsuperscript{59}

The national election that was held in 1988 brought Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan People's Party to power. But the survival of a democratic government was still under question in Pakistan. Because, the role of military is still very powerful in the politics of Pakistan. Moreover the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution that enabled the President to dismiss the democratically elected government under partisan circumstances further disturbs the sustenance of democracy. This was evident from the dismissal of Benazir Bhutto's government in 1990.\textsuperscript{60} Hence, as far as Pakistan is concerned, there is a long way to go before it could emerge as a stable democratic country.

Unlike its parent country, Pakistan, Bangladesh started its democratic journey on a positive note. The Awami League, the party that led Bangladesh to independence, established a parliamentary democracy envisaging a central role for the electoral process. The first nation-wide general elections was held in March 1973. The Awami League won a landslide

\textsuperscript{59} Seyyed V.R. Naser, "Democracy and Crisis of Governability Pakistan", \textit{Asian Survey}, (Berkeley), vol.32, no.6 (June 1992), pp.522-3.

\textsuperscript{60} ibid, p.526.
victory by obtaining 292 out of the 300 seats. However, the Awami League, notwithstanding its overwhelming popular support, soon found itself a party of corrupt, inefficient and self-seeking politicians. Moreover the government was challenged by systemic and anti-systemic forces because of numerous socio-economic problems.

Democracy faced a severe setback in December 1974 when Prime Minister Mujibur Rahman imposed an emergency and suspended fundamental rights. Further, he amended the constitution in favour of a presidential system and became President with extensive powers in 1975. He also banned the political parties including the Awami League and established a one party system namely the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL). However, before the new system could be experimented with, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated on 15 August in a coup. After this Bangladesh


witnessed coups and counter coups until General Ziaur Rahman emerged as a dominant figure. This led Bangladesh into its first martial law regime. Bangladesh's failure to emerge as a stable democracy during this period could be attributed to the Awami League's inexperience in the governing process. During the two decades of its existence under unified Pakistan, it never had the opportunity of governing except at the provincial level.

Once General Ziaur Rahman established his control over the nation, he followed the footsteps of General Ayub Khan by entering politics on his own terms to legitimise his rule. He initiated a democratization process by reviving the electoral process and lifting the ban on the functioning of political parties. He also formed his own political party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. But Ziaur Rahman stuck to the presidential system of government with extensive powers vested with the President which was first introduced by Mujibur Rahman in 1975. The Prime Minister and the Council

65. For more information see Lawrence Lifschultz and Kai Bird, "Bangladesh: Anatomy of a Coup", Economic and Political Weekly, (Bombay), (December 8, 1979), pp. 1999-2014


of Ministers would be nominated by and be responsible to the President. The major difference between General Ayub Khan and General Ziaur Rahman was that the latter enabled the President and the Parliament to be elected directly on the basis of universal franchise. According to Shyamali Ghosh, Presidential and Parliamentary elections were held in 1978 and 1979, respectively. General Ziaur Rahman who presented himself as a candidate, won the presidential election, and his party, the BNP, won a comfortable majority by securing 207 out of 300 seats. The major opposition party, the Awami League won only 39 seats. As President Ziaur Rahman transformed himself into a political leader, the prospects for the institutionalization of democratic process looked bright. However, he was assassinated by junior Army officers in 1981.

He was succeeded by Vice-President Sattar as President of Bangladesh. Subsequently, in the Presidential election


that was held in November 1981, he was re-elected as President. However, within four months he was thrown out of power in a bloodless coup that was staged by Chief of Army Staff, General Ershad, in March 1982. Like General Ziaur Rahman, he also made his maiden entry into politics and formed his own political party, the Jatyo Party. Unlike in the past, opposition parties - the Awami League and the BNP, came out openly against the Martial Law regime. To bring the situation under control, General Ershad assured a national election in the beginning of 1984 and made efforts for the opposition's participation. However, opposition parties refused to participate in the election and demanded the withdrawal of the Martial Law, his resignation and an election under a caretaker government. Finally, the Parliamentary election was held only in 1986 without acceding to the demands of the opposition. While the Awami League contested the election, the BNP decided to boycott it. The result gave Ershad's Jatyo Party a simple majority of 153 out of 300 seats which was said to have been achieved by the government through massive violence and rigging.

71. For more details see S.R. Chakravorty, Bangladesh under Mujib, Zia and Ershad: Dilemma of a New Nation, (New Delhi, 1995).
72. Rehman Sobhan, n.63, p.46.
73. ibid., p.48.
Notwithstanding the electoral victory that was stage managed by the government, Ershad continued to face wrath of the opposition who demanded his resignation. The opposition boycotted the Presidential and Parliamentary election that was held in 1988. Though Ershad managed to conduct the elections, he could not claim any legitimacy on the basis of it. At last, Ershad stepped down on 6 December 1990 due to nationwide agitations against his government. He was succeeded by Chief Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed as the Acting President of Bangladesh. The general elections were held on 27 February 1991. The competition was mainly between the Awami League and the BNP. The BNP emerged victorious and formed the government under Khalida Zia and chose to follow a parliamentary system of government. Though democracy was revived in 1991, its sustenance depends upon how for the political leadership would enable the institutionalization of the democratic system.

The situation in Nepal was of a different kind. Unlike in Pakistan and Bangladesh, it was not the Army but the reluctance of the Monarchy to relinquish power in favour of a popular government which delayed Nepal emerging as a

74. ibid., p.50.

democratic country. The movement towards establishing a popular government began in Nepal in the late 1950s. It was led by a political party - the Nepali Congress, with the blessings of the Monarchy which till then acted as a pawn in the hand of the ruling Oligarchs - the Rana family. As a result, the Ranas were overthrown from power in 1951. However, the struggle for democracy was far from over because power was restored to the hands of the Monarchy. It was the result of a compromise formula that was drawn out between the Monarchy, the Ranas and the political elite, by which all of them committed themselves to the restoration of a popular government. 76

The Interim Government Act of 1951 promulgated by King Tribhuvan clearly expressed his intention to restore a democratically-elected government. However, subsequent amendments to the Interim Government Act of 1951 proved that the Monarchy was in no mood to hand over power to the popularly elected government. 77 As a result, once again the political elite from different backgrounds regrouped together in the name of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in


1957 and agitated against the Monarchy. This forced King Mahendra to announce the holding of a nation-wide general elections in 1959.\textsuperscript{78} However, this was secured at the cost of a compromise under the 1959 Constitution that envisaged a dominant role to the King and retained supreme executive power and extensive discretionary and emergency powers which could restrict the functioning of the democratically elected government.\textsuperscript{79} The first nationwide general elections were held in 1959 under the new Constitution in which the Nepali Congress won a comfortable majority by securing \textsuperscript{73} out of \textsuperscript{109} seats.\textsuperscript{80} However, confrontation between the monarchy and the popularly-elected government under B.P. Koirala came to the fore in both domestic and foreign policy. This led King Mahendra to use his emergency power and dismiss the government by branding it as anti-national. Prime Minister B.P. Koirala, his Cabinet Ministers and other political activists were imprisoned.\textsuperscript{81}

In 1961 King Mahendra developed the Panchayat system of

\textsuperscript{78} ibid, p.7.

\textsuperscript{79} ibid., p.8.

\textsuperscript{80} For more information on 1959 Parliamentary election see I.D. Mishra, \textit{Systemic Strains and Political Development in Nepal}, (Varanasi, 1985), pp. 25-54.

"partyless democracy" to legitimise his rule. It is a four-tiered structure leading up from village assemblies to a national legislature. Members were indirectly elected as well as appointed. This system continued up to the 1980 referendum. The functioning of political parties were banned. As a result, the Nepali Congress and the Nepali Communist Party leaders went underground or took asylum in India.

However, due to students agitations in 1979 against the existing government, King Birendra declared that a national referendum would be held in 1980 to decide the future of Nepal's political system. People were provided with a choice between the panchayat system and a multi-party system of government. The significance of the referendum was that it was the second nation-wide election that was held on the basis of universal franchise. More importantly, political parties were allowed to campaign in favour of multi-party democracy. The referendum was held in 1980 and the results went in favour of the King who was for the continuance of

82. For more information on Panchayat system, see Yugeshwar P. Verma, Nepal's Panchayat Polity, (Kathmandu, 1989).

the panchayat system in a modified manner. 84

Based on this, two nation-wide general elections were held on the basis of universal franchise to elect the Rastriya Panchayat in 1981 and 1986 respectively. Meanwhile the political parties that were banned organised themselves to oppose the existing political system and mobilised strong support from the masses. By the late 1980's opposition against the King and the panchayat system spread all over the country. As a result, King Birendra acceded to the demands of the political parties and asked the Nepali Congress to form the interim government. Under the interim government the parliamentary election was held on 12 May 1991. The Nepali Congress won a simple majority of 110 out of 205 seats and formed the government under G.P. Koirala which led to the establishment of parliamentary democracy in Nepal. However, Nepal has a long way to go before it can emerge as a stable democracy. 85

Among South Asian countries, Sri Lanka is unique in number of ways. Unlike India, Sri Lanka secured its independence without much struggle and more by constitutional reforms. Significantly, even before power was

84. For more information see Rishikesh Shaha, n.77.
85. For more information see S.K. Chaturvedi, Nepal: Internal Politics and Its Constitutions, (New Delhi, 1992) and Lok Raj Baral, n.77.
transferred, it experienced three nation-wide general elections on the basis of universal franchise. While it enabled the Sri Lankan political elite to gain sufficient knowledge in the democratic governing process, it also politicized the masses to a great extent. This resulted in increased participation of the people in the electoral process which was evident from the elections that was held after independence. More importantly, unlike other South Asian countries, the evolution of a party system in Sri Lanka was very fast. Within a decade of its independence, two major political parties - the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) had emerged in the political scene which further strengthened the democratic process. Until 1988 power has been transferred on five occasions between the ruling party to the Opposition. Sri Lanka also experienced two forms of government. While it followed a Parliamentary system of government upto 1977, it shifted to the presidential system in 1978.86

However, once again like in other South Asian countries, the erosion of democracy in Sri Lanka could be identified from the ambitions of the political leadership who often manipulated the constitution to strengthen its position. It all started with the SLFP-led United Front

86. Electoral experience of Sri Lanka is discussed in detail in the ensuing chapters.
government which extended its term of office for another two years undemocratically by counting on the date of promulgation of the 1972 constitution. Further, it also restricted the functioning of democratic institutions by often invoking emergency regulations. Though the SLFP faced defeat in the 1977 general elections it set the trend towards the erosion of democracy in Sri Lanka.

This was evident from the actions of the UNP government under Jayewardene which manipulated the Constitution on a number of occasions with the aid of its three-fourth majority in the Parliament. The worst instance was the extension of the term of Parliament by another five years through a referendum. This virtually eliminated the opposition from playing any meaningful role in the political process until 1988. Further, this provided a space for anti-systemic forces like JVP (which failed in its attempt to overthrow the government by armed insurgency in 1971) to challenge the State. Above all, the failure of the UNP and the SLFP to accommodate the interests of the minority Tamil community plunged Sri Lanka into a civil war. All these factors paved the way for an erosion of the democratic process in Sri Lanka. Subsequently it had its impact on the

electoral politics of Sri Lanka which till then had been a peaceful affair. The second Presidential election was held amidst violent campaigns by anti-systemic forces.88

Conclusion

As J.S. Mill stated "it was the presence of democratic institutions that shaped the attitude towards political participation, created a spirit of public mindedness and of tolerance for opposing viewpoints and interests, and increased competence among citizens".89 It was true in the case of India and Sri Lanka where the institutionalization of democratic process enabled the political elite as well as people to accept the 'rules of the game', leading to their emergence as stable democracies. On the other hand, the failure to provide space for democratic institutions to grow led Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal to oscillate between democracy and authoritarianism. However, if some elements of the democratic feature did survive, notwithstanding the authoritarian character of the government, there are more chances that democracy could be revived.90 This was evident in the case of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal where

88. The role of violence during the Second Presidential Election is discussed in detail in the ensuing chapter.
90. Robert Pinkney, n.12, p.9.
authoritarian regimes permitted a certain measure of people's participation and the existence of opposition led these countries to emerge as full fledged democracies in the late 1980s. Above all, the erosion of democracy in South Asia could be attributed to the choices and actions of the political leadership rather than the lack of stable economic growth that has been suggested by various scholars.