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AUTOCRATIZATION IN SOUTH ASIA

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A pronounced trend towards democracy in South Asia is now in reverse. Not long ago, the picture was different. India was on a steady climb in democracy ratings for decades. Economic liberalization, which was the hallmark of reforms led by finance minister Manmohan Singh in the 1990s under the premiership of Narasimha Rao, appeared to be compatible with giving more space for political competitors in a landscape which had long been dominated by the Congress party. India's neighbours were gradually taking steps to follow its lead towards greater democracy. In the early 1990s, Bangladesh showed great promise with political and substantial liberalization reforms as Khaleda Zia became the first female prime minister. A long spell of military rule in Pakistan came to an end late in 2007. The tragic assassination of Benazir Bhutto, just after she had returned from exile and taken the lead as the country's most popular civilian leader, marked the beginning of a first peaceful transition towards democracy. Pakistan then managed to pass Huntington's two-turnover test (Huntington 1991) with no fewer than three elections (2008, 2013, and 2018) leading to alternations in power. Two of the three largest parties formed successive governments completing full terms in office. After decades of war, Sri Lanka entered a more peaceful era after the Tamil Tigers were brutally defeated in 2009. Since then, Sri Lanka had three general elections and peaceful power transitions. During the last three decades, South Asia clearly became part of the "third wave of democratization" alongside many other countries around the world. Following the end of the Cold War, democracy seemed to be a natural gravitational point that states inevitably moved towards if unfettered. (In)famously, Francis Fukuyama proclaimed that in some respects history was coming to an end (Fukuyama 1992). This idea that liberal democracy was accepted as a supra-ideology seemed to find support in South Asia as well.

We now know that such perceptions were misguided for understanding democratic development in most parts of the world. According to Freedom House, the level of freedom in the world is now in decline for the fifteenth consecutive year (Repucci and Slipowitz 2020). The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute traces the beginnings of the increase in "autocratizing" countries further back, starting even before 2000 (Lührmann et al. 2020: 15). South Asia is a part of this "third wave of autocratization" (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Over the last ten years, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has pushed Bangladesh towards becoming a one-party state. Freedom of speech is being muffled in Pakistan and minorities are at risk in Sri Lanka.

India is rapidly sinking in reports on democracy and liberal freedoms provided by Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders, Pen International and Amnesty International. The most recent release of indicators of democratic performance from V-Dem shows that India in 2020 moved from being an *electoral democracy* to becoming an *electoral autocracy* (Alizada et al. 2021). Although India's democracy has since independence been exposed to severe challenges, it did achieve "a sufficient level of institutional guarantees of democracy such as freedom of association, suffrage, clean elections, an elected executive, and freedom of expression". However, India now falls "short of democratic standards due to significant irregularities, limitations on party competition or other violations" (Lindberg, Lührmann, Tannenberg 2018: 61) which motivates the downgrading. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to claim that South Asia is going through a democratic crisis.

Nonetheless, this does not automatically translate into proof that the region called South Asia is irreversibly transitioning to authoritarian rule. These processes are rarely linear in either direction. All countries included in this book have traversed trajectories towards democracy that have been all but straightforward. Democracy has been interrupted, suspended, and seen such severe backlashes that made it seem implausible that it could recover, yet it did. So, the question is, how severe is the autocratization trend? What are its characteristics? How deep does it go? This book aims at providing answers to such questions, to enable realistic assessments of the chances for a democratic recovery in the foreseeable future.

A broader discussion on trends in South Asia is included in Chapter 30. However, the focus in this book is mainly on the four countries with the most significant impact on the region as a whole, which is also the four with the greatest variation in regime trajectories. All four countries – India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka – share the experience of some or even major democratic achievements since gaining independence from British colonial rule. But their paths differ greatly. Democratic take-offs have been interrupted quickly in some cases while India for a long time trod a more linear path towards democracy. Democracy survived or made comebacks in spite of severe constraints of economic resources as well as conflicts in and between countries, states, and provinces. Also, no sooner had the colonial rule come to an end, before the whole region became an important arena for the Cold War with adverse effects on both political stability and development. The paths towards democracy have always been rocky in South Asia. However, as Sheri Berman (2019) points out, this is more of a rule rather than an exception if we take a historical view on democratization in the world. Consequently, as analysts we must not overinterpret what could be temporary swings and keep in mind the democratic achievements of the past. This is to remind us that trajectories portrayed in this volume may defy the perspectives provided by various kinds of historical determinism that always awaits an endgame where civilizations will clash (Huntington 1993). Changes in developments may eventually transpire even if current trajectories – as we shall see – are disheartening.

The guiding motivation for this book is to complement previous contributions that have provided insights and knowledge on forces supporting democratization in South Asia. The focus in this volume is on the trends, factors, changes, and circumstances that support the opposite – autocratization. There is an urgent need to understand causes behind the reversal. For such a large region it is impossible to cover *all* relevant events and topics associated with autocratization. However, the authors offer their rich insights, perspectives, and knowledge on what they regard as central for understanding autocratization in the four countries that are represented in this book.

The natural starting point for an introductory chapter is to define more closely what the most central concept of concern here stands for. It is necessary to explain what is meant by

studying, or saying that a country is experiencing, *autocratization*. Secondly, it provides a broad overview of the trajectories relating to democratic performance across all four countries, using data collected by V-Dem (Coppedge et al. 2021). This is followed by a look at the trends for the region as a whole. The final section of the chapter discusses the broader context in which India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka are located. In order to understand domestic trends, it is also necessary to have perspective on how the trend for South Asia fits in with the world at large.

The following chapters provide more detailed and in-depth knowledge on autocratization in each country. The participating authors provide their analyses and perspectives on the major forces of autocratization in the four countries. The chapters stand as individual contributions in their own right. There is no attempt to provide a single standpoint synthesizing all the insights provided by the participating authors. However, in the final analysis, the chapters of Part 5 (“How to comprehend autocratization in South Asia – three broad perspectives”) draw on the contributions of this book and other research contributions to present commonalities in, and divergent patterns of, autocratization in South Asia. It contains discussions of the role played by the recent expansion of China and ideas relating to nationalism and liberalism that are being shaped and changed today. It is also argued that it is tempting to conclude that the observable patterns will be perpetual – as if South Asia is simply reverting to a trajectory that is common for most other parts of Asia where democracy has always had a bleak future. However, the chapters in this book point to an array of processes that cannot be reduced to an enduring path-dependency determined by economic, historical, and cultural factors. Even when deterministic patterns sometimes find empirical support, it is important to remember that such perspectives on causes may be palatable for political reasons. If it is concluded that forces of history for example led to autocratization in a country, or several countries, then this may function to absolve political leaders and the citizens voting for them, of their roles and responsibilities. In the trajectories described here, agency is visible and important.

Regime types and autocratization

Let us start by clarifying central regime-related concepts that have already been mentioned. The determination that India recently went from being an *electoral democracy* to becoming an *electoral autocracy*, was based on the “Regimes of the World” scale with four categories (Lührmann, Tannenberg, and Lindberg 2018). States which are de-facto multiparty carry out free and fair elections, and do so while also upholding the rule of law and liberal principles, are classified as liberal democracies. If the rule of law is somewhat in question and liberal principles are not fully guaranteed, a country slides down the scale and is classified as an electoral democracy. If the respect for democratic institutions is further in doubt, the country moves into the autocracy-sphere. If multiparty elections are still actually held but “rulers are not accountable to citizens”, then the country is an electoral autocracy. If even multiparty elections for the chief executive or the legislature are absent, then the state reaches the regime-type end station of closed autocracy. A journey in the direction of this end-point but regardless of from what level it started, is referred to as *autocratization*.

Autocratization is the opposite to democratization, and both involve periods of substantial and sustained changes in levels of democracy, respectively (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Following the literature, we use the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) to measure autocratization in South Asia. The EDI is based on Dahl’s conceptualization of polyarchy (Dahl 1971, Teorell et al. 2019) as it goes beyond pure electoral contestation and participation, adding

freedom of expression (freedom of speech and alternative sources of information combined) as well as conditions of a broad swathe of associational freedom (Coppedge et al. 2021). The third wave of autocratization sweeping across the globe is characterized by leaders who have come to power through free and fair elections but derail freedom of expression and associations once in power (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Among the ten most negatively affected indicators over the last ten years, nine are aspects of freedom of association and expression (Lührmann et al. 2021). This also applies to autocratization in South Asia.

Episodes of autocratization capture periods with a definitive start and end date during which substantial and sustained declines in democratic qualities take place (Edgell et al. 2020, Wilson et al. 2020). As discussed above, regime transformations are typically nonlinear, and such declines may result in democratic breakdown, further deterioration under non-democracy, or the regime could avert breakdown by reversing the trend and sustaining minimal levels of democracy necessary to be considered democratic. The new Episodes of Regime Transformation (ERT) dataset provides identification of episodes of both democratization and autocratization measured on V-Dem's latest version of the Electoral Democracy Index (Coppedge et al. 2021). It identifies the onset and end dates, as well as the outcome, of both democratization and autocratization episodes (Edgell et al. 2020). This will be the natural starting point presented in the beginning of the next section which provides a broad portrayal of autocratization in South Asia. As the analysis proceeds at country level, the figures will focus on measurements of freedom of association and expression, and on variables capturing the characteristics of elections.

Autocratization in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka

Figure 1.1 depicts the overall level of democracy as measured by the EDI in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka from the end of the Cold War in 1989 to the present (2020). The recent period with episodes of autocratization in South Asia, based on the ERT, is marked. This bird's-eye view on democratic performance and autocratization over time in the four countries in focus in this book makes it clear that South Asia is currently going through a state of transformation characterized as autocratization. Since independence, the ongoing crisis is currently at least as severe as the situation was in the early and mid-1970s (this is discussed further in Chapter 28). Since the withdrawal of British colonial forces, Sri Lanka and India were the only countries to immediately achieve a successful democratic take-off. However, Indira Gandhi suspended democracy in 1975, and then also democracy started to decline in Sri Lanka. Nonetheless, India fairly quickly managed to get back on the democratic path in 1977. After three decades, democratic performance of the whole region appeared to be improving. Until recently.

While the onset of the global third wave of autocratization has been traced back to before 2000, the countries in South Asia seem to have joined later and Sri Lanka counters the trend. While much of the world including South Asia register significant democratic regression, Sri Lanka has democratized and qualifies to be classified as a relatively decent electoral democracy since 2015. There is however, a decline in 2018–2020, which corresponds to several worrying trends pointed out in the section on Sri Lanka later in this book. India's piecemeal, uneven, and protracted degeneration into what is today a questionable borderline-case of just barely keeping electoral democracy started in earnest around 2006 to 2007. Yet, the more definitive descent arrived along with Narendra Modi coming into power as the 14th Prime Minister of India in 2014. India's episode of autocratization is ongoing at present and transformed its regime type to an electoral autocracy.

Figure 1.1 Electoral democracy (polyarchy), 1990–2020

Source: Varieties of democracy, version 11.1 (March 2021).

After the period from January 2007 to January 2009 under a military-backed caretaker government period, politics was somewhat democratic in Bangladesh for about five years until the current episode of autocratization started. The episode is ongoing with the outcome unknown just as in the case of India, with the difference that Bangladesh is clearly an electoral autocracy today. Finally, Pakistan experienced a military coup in 1999, which was followed by a politically violent decade. Some civil liberties were upheld, although General Musharraf reigned with support from the military up until early 2008. Although Pakistan then made a promising transition towards democracy and eventually even passed Huntington's two-turnover test, another decline of democracy set in around 2015. Pakistan is since then in an episode of autocratization just like much of the region (and many countries in the world). Our first deeper insights to this episode of autocratization are provided by looking at how freedom of expression is present in the media, in academia and in cultural life, by taking into account the freedom to organize groups and activities in civil society and to form political parties, and how well elections are handled or restricted by various political forces.

India

It makes sense to start the analysis with the most populated country, the largest economy, and the strongest political impact in the region. The direction which India takes typically has a great influence on its neighbours. The episode of autocratization in India under Prime Minister Modi affects all measurements included in EDI, except the extent of suffrage. According to V-Dem's *Democracy Report 2020*, India belongs to the top-ten group

Figure 1.2 Key indicators of freedom of association, expression, and the media, India 1990–2020

Source: Varieties of democracy, version 11.1 (March 2021).

of countries in the world that have autocratized the most over the past ten years (Lührmann et al. 2020: 16). Figure 1.2 depicts that the areas affected negatively first and by far the most are freedom of expression, association, and the media. Here the indicators for associational freedom include measurements of repression directed towards Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), the way the state may regulate the entry or exit of CSOs “into public life”, and also to what extent opposition parties are autonomous in relation to the regime in power (Coppedge et al. 2021). The measurements of freedom of expression consist of variables measuring the extent of harassment directed towards journalists, an assessment of efforts made by the government to censor print and broadcast media, and the amount of freedom granted to academia and culture.

Evidently, the government led by Manmohan Singh (2009–2014) had a negative impact on democratic governance to some degree. It was in fact corruption scandals that paved important parts of the way for the BJP leading up to the 2014 election. There was, however, a more significant and steep decline in almost all indicators when Modi and the BJP came into power, and this descent has continued since. Apparently, the Modi government has imposed severe *de facto* restrictions of liberal freedoms without directly attacking the autonomy of opposition parties. In fact, barriers to parties entering politics remain low, elections are fully multiparty, no significant parties have been banned, and opposition parties retain a high degree of autonomy from the government and the ruling BJP party.

However, the Modi-led government in India *has* used laws on sedition, defamation, and counterterrorism to silence critics (Human Rights Watch 2019). By far the most dramatic change is the almost close to eradication of freedom from government censorship of media in

India. Along with the dismal situation for journalists and civil liberties activists who actually write critically about the government and therefore get harassed, imprisoned, or subjected to abuse, this is a very concerning trajectory (Widmalm 2016: 211–212). The arbitrary arrests of the civil rights activists and journalists accused in the so called “Bhima Koregaon-case” are just one dramatic example (Jaffrelot 2020).

Independent civil society organizations are especially hard hit in the ongoing autocratization episode. As will be discussed later in this book, the pressure is mainly directed towards organizations that have supported civil rights – especially for minorities and women. Civil society organizations aligning themselves with the Hindutva movement have rather gained more freedom (Basu 2015). What is severely affected is the freedom of independent civil society organizations to exist, and to organize activities autonomously from government interference and direction. The two civil society indicators included in Figure 1.2 have taken a steep dive over especially the past six years or so after the BJP assumed power.

Furthermore, the quality and fairness of elections have also deteriorated significantly over the past five to six years (The Wire 2021). Figure 1.3 shows variables that are commonly used to indicate to what extent elections are clean. The variable “Election free and fair” is a broad measurement taking into account the whole election process and its quality. “Election government intimidation” measures more specifically to what extent opposition parties and their representatives were exposed to harassment or intimidation by the government. The freedom from government intervention in the Election Management Body (EMB) in the country is captured in “EMB autonomy”. Finally, a kind of residual category is included in “Election other voting irregularities”, which captures any kind of intervention in the elections and vote fraud. Figure 1.3 evinces a significant decline on all these indicators for India in the current period.

Figure 1.3 Key indicators of the quality of elections, India 1990–2020

Source: Varieties of democracy, version 11.1 (March 2021).

The autonomy of the election management body depreciates severely over the period since 2013 signalling perhaps the most concerning aspect of decline. Government intimidation of opposition declined already with the 2008 elections but has not worsened further much since. Voting irregularities have been somewhat of an issue in India for a long time but got worse again in 2008 and again deteriorated further in 2019. The overall freedom and fairness of elections, finally, took a hard hit with the last elections held under Prime Minister Modi's reign in 2019.

To sum up, the present episode of autocratization in India is affecting key areas of democracy, and it particularly concerns freedom of expression, association and the media. There is undoubtedly a decline in the quality of elections, but it is the media and civil society that are curbed in the most dramatic ways.

Pakistan

Pakistan is different from the other countries in the region in that it has never qualified as an electoral democracy. Even with multiparty elections and increases in various freedoms, Pakistan has fallen short of ever crossing the threshold (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.4 shows, in a very similar pattern to India, that the main deterioration of associational freedoms in the last ten years or so, is due to increasing control of independent civil society organizations. The Pakistani government has progressively tightened their control of which organizations are allowed to exist to an extent where there are few independent organizations left to exist and repression is active even if moderate.

The developments in Pakistan over the past decade are also similar to India's in the area of freedom of expression including alternative sources of information, but even more pronounced and to worse levels, as displayed in Figure 1.4.

Figure 1.4 Key indicators of freedom of association, expression, and the media, Pakistan 1990–2020
Source: Varieties of democracy, version 11.1 (March 2021).

Figure 1.5 Key indicators of the quality of elections, Pakistan 1990–2020

Source: Varieties of democracy, version 11.1 (March 2021).

Academics' and cultural workers' freedom is also much worse in Pakistan than in India, and has fallen close to rock-bottom alongside journalists who now are almost always harassed if and when they dare to write critically about powerful actors in the country. It should be mentioned here also that Reporters Without Borders (RSF) warn that the Government of Pakistan may now even be persecuting journalists in exile (RSF 2020). Government censorship of the media has gone from largely absent as late as 2012, to frequent and severe in 2019. There are additional similarities to India. The restrictions of CSOs and the deterioration of freedom of expression in various forms have been possible without restricting the autonomy of the opposition parties. And the decline of freedom for organizations working for civil liberties is matched by the opposite trend for organizations that are religious and anti-democratic (Widmalm 2016: 212–216). Yet, the recent episode of further autocratization in Pakistan is driven primarily by a deterioration in the freedom of expression.

Figure 1.5 demonstrates that electoral autocracy in Pakistan has had rather unusual characteristics. The quality and integrity of elections has been for a long time, and still is, the chief issue.

Voting irregularities are a recurring problem. Some of these seem to have become slightly worse since 2008. There are declining levels of autonomy of the election management body, there is a general lack of freedom and fairness in the elections, as well as a worsening of government intimidation of the opposition in the last elections.

In sum, Pakistan went through an episode of very gradual and protracted liberalization of its electoral autocracy from 2007 to 2015 but never became a democracy. After that, the tide has turned into an episode of autocratization driven primarily by dramatic increases in government

control of civil society as well as a sharp increase in the government’s largely successful efforts to curb media freedom.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh’s trajectory – depicted in Figure 1.6 – over the past decade is typical for the third wave of autocratization as depicted by Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) and Lührmann et al. (2020), with one particular exception. Bangladesh is one of the very few countries in the world where the integrity and fairness of multiparty elections are undermined almost from the outset. This happened in a dramatic fashion with the elections in 2014. The usual sequence is that media and civil society are suppressed before the formal institutions come under attack.

This somewhat unusual autocratization pattern is reflected in almost all indicators describing how elections are handled, shown in Figure 1.7. While the election management body’s autonomy has long been limited in Bangladesh, it was constrained further in a dramatic fashion in 2011 and 2012, then gradually deteriorated further over the last few years to be almost non-existent. Meanwhile the large declines in other election qualities such as absence of government intimidation, voting irregularities, and violence, came with the elections in 2014.

The indicators of associational freedoms in Figure 1.6 have remained at relatively democratic levels much longer than the election-related ones in Bangladesh, as shown in Figure 1.7. While

Figure 1.6 Key indicators of freedom of association, expression, and the media, Bangladesh 1990–2020
Source: Varieties of democracy, version 11.1 (March 2021).

Figure 1.7 Key indicators of the quality of elections, Bangladesh 1990–2020

Source: Varieties of democracy, version 11.1 (March 2021).

the autonomy of opposition parties took a hit following the 2012 elections, civil society was not affected until around 2016 when also barriers to political parties forming were raised.

In comparison, freedom of expression displays a much more disparate picture in Figure 1.6, where some areas such as the level of harassment of journalists and media’s self-censorship have been much worse than media’s freedom to reflect varying perspectives and provide non-biased information, as well as the freedom of academics and cultural workers. But all aspects have been in a gradual and significant decline since 2012 in a pattern that is typical for the third wave of autocratization. The most dramatic change continuing to dominate the autocratization process in Bangladesh is a kind of breakdown of democracy in connection with the 2014 and 2018 elections (Riaz 2021). The Awami League government, guided by Prime Minister Sheik Hasina, pursued policies aimed at intimidating and harassing political opponents, which resulted in a massive boycott of the election then. Democracy has not recovered since.

Sri Lanka

In contrast to the other countries in this book, Sri Lanka’s political trajectory has from 2014 to 2018 been in a democratic direction. Juxtaposed to India, which is in the top-ten of autocratizing countries in the world over the last ten years, Sri Lanka is in the top-four group of seeing the largest gains in democratic qualities among all democratizing countries (Lührmann et al. 2020: 23) and regained its status as an electoral democracy in this period.

Figure 1.8 Key indicators of freedom of association, expression, and the media, Sri Lanka 1990–2020
Source: Varieties of democracy, version 11.1 (March 2021).

Figure 1.8 displays how the positive developments were spearheaded by improvements in freedom of expression and alternative sources of information already around 2010, followed by significant advances in the quality of elections and associational freedoms a few years later as shown in Figure 1.9.

Figure 1.8 demonstrates that the freedom of expression indicators follow a very similar pattern to the quality of elections but foreshadows those. From lows in the middle of the first decade of the 2000s, the pro-government bias in the media lessens significantly around 2008 along with smaller improvements in a series of other aspects of indicators. These advances continue in a gradual but steady fashion over the following years, portending the transition back to democracy a few years later.

As illustrated by the indicator of opposition parties' autonomy in Figure 1.8, most associational freedoms remained unaffected by the war and other dynamics that derailed many aspects of democracy in Sri Lanka off and on in the 1990s and 2000s. Just as in the other countries discussed above, more autocratic periods are associated with severe restrictions on, and repression of, independent civil society associations. With the end of the civil conflict, which was extremely brutal, there is an almost seismic shift in associational freedoms for this sector.

As shown in Figure 1.9, the improvements in the quality of elections are the results of almost across-the-board advances in all the indicators. Notably, the first change for the better comes for the autonomy of the election management board, a critical foundation for democratic elections. This is followed by a broad swathe of positive changes in the qualities of elections in 2014, and then again a dramatic set of improvements in 2019.

Figure 1.9 Key indicators of the quality of elections, Sri Lanka 1990–2020

Source: Varieties of democracy, version 11.1 (March 2021).

Consequently, the development for Sri Lanka is from a democratic perspective very impressive. Nonetheless, the contributions later in this book will show that the democratization process for Sri Lanka is to say the least fragile. The risk for backsliding is imminent. The decline in several indicators since 2018 that are included in Figure 1.8 suggests that such a downward turn may have already been initiated. The constitutional crisis in 2018, the fact that the previous prime minister refused to leave office after the election, and that afterwards, the president appointed his own brother as prime minister, and a dramatic increased militarization of the state and society, are causes for concern (DeVotta 2021).

Autocratization in South Asia in a comparative perspective

A *very* broad and comparative perspective on what has been described here – using the EDI for South Asia, including Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives, and Afghanistan – may not appear to represent such a dramatic decline (Figure 1.10). Undoubtedly 2020 is worse than 2011, but it is still far better than 2007. In what way are these numbers telling us that there is an ongoing episode of autocratization covering the whole region?

The level of the EDI for South Asia rose quickly in 2007, then starts to sink slowly – struggling not to slip too much below the 0.5 mark. For a short while South Asia almost managed to reach the average EDI level of the world. Since then the EDI level in the world and South Asia have both been on a slight downward trajectory. If the trend is persistent,

Figure 1.10 Electoral Democracy Index, the World and Asia 1990–2020

Source: Varieties of democracy, version 11.1 (March 2021).

South Asian countries will within two or three years pass the level of democracy of South-East Asia (Laos, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, Philippines, Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam) which seems to have stagnated in a non-democratic equilibrium. The reason for this is that the recent EDI for South Asia is propped up by small countries such as the Maldives, which saw a dramatic improvement in democratic performance 2017–2020. This masks a more general and continued downward trend for the region. It also needs to be repeated that when India moves downwards on the measurements provided here – when it moves closer to the democratic performance indicators of Pakistan as civil liberties are lost – it drags about three-quarters of the population in the whole region with it. When the government of India stops protecting essential democratic freedoms, a large part of the whole world become citizens of a backslider region. The weight of India should be taken into account. Consequently we need to shed light on this with an alternative way of presenting the changes in democratic performance in South Asia. The effect is illustrated by looking at a comparison provided based on V-Dem data showing how many countries in the world are democratizing and how many are autocratizing.

In Figure 1.11, the graph to the left depicts the number of countries in the whole South Asia region that are democratizing and how many are autocratizing. In the graph to the right the effect is weighted in relation to population. The sharp upward turn of autocratization there is mostly influenced by the democratic decline in India since it has a population of about 1.4 billion. Democratization in Sri Lanka is visibly affecting the trend for the whole of South Asia shown in Figure 1.10, while it completely disappears in Figure 1.11. So why not then only study India to describe autocratization in “South Asia”?

Figure 1.11 Electoral Democracy (Polyarchy), democratizing, and autocratizing countries 1972–2020 in South Asia

Source: Varieties of democracy, version 11.1 (March 2021).

The answer is that *comparisons* may reveal commonalities – including factors which may drive autocratization as well as democratization and that may have nothing to do with the size of a population. If we find factors that are steering both Sri Lanka and India towards less democracy, then this may suggest that such factors may be relevant threats to democracy in many other places in South Asia, and outside the region, as well. South Asia, even if we cannot fit all the countries in the region into the analysis here, undoubtedly provides what has inspired the name for the V-Dem project – varieties of both democracy, and autocratization. Some paths are very country-specific, and this will become evident when the four countries are discussed in their own sections.

Even if the impact of India is great in the region, the paths to and from democracy are interesting *per se*. Sometimes patterns are replicated so that an episode of autocratization appears to connect a whole region. However, even if several countries are moving in the same direction at the same time, they still may do so for different reasons. In this first chapter we have already seen here that the ongoing autocratization episode of South Asia is *characterized* by factors that all four countries have in common. Autocratization is observable in the areas of civic life, freedom of opinion, media, academia and cultural life. Nonetheless, this is the broader picture. As will be evident in the coming sections, all countries have unique traits too. Just as they in the past have taken different paths to democratization, they have individual features as well relating to the current autocratization episode. Here we need to add also that countries in South Asia are spurred by their unique relationships to neighbours in the region. And sometimes when one country gives up its support for democracy, a contagion effect is activated and neighbouring countries become encouraged to do the same. Therefore, the patterns we

observe at the macro level can only be understood by going deeper into the country-specific cases. And when that is done, the more is learned about the varieties or uniformities in the processes leading to autocratization. For the future, this may provide insights and tools that can be used to employ counter measures to prevent a new autocratization episode – given that the will and power to do so is there.

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