AUTOCRATIZATION AND REGIME CONVERGENCE IN SOUTH ASIA – AN UNDETERMINED PATH

Sten Widmalm

The contributions in this book have shown that South Asia is currently one of the world's regions where the level of democracy is declining sharply. Although the Indian subcontinent and its surrounding states are difficult to delimit in relation to the rest of Asia, the trend concerns India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Should we include Myanmar the impression would only deepen. Evidently, all states in this region either find it very hard to make significant gains in democratization, or have been caught in a seemingly unstoppable trend of autocratization. Are there more general explanations for the poor democratic performance of South Asia in addition to the country-specific chapters that have been presented here?

It is a truism that democracy means little if there is no economic growth. However, the regime trajectories described in the four countries in focus in this book, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, provide further support for the claim that economic growth is not guaranteed to be accompanied by liberal democratic freedom. Instead, the familiar (Polanyi 2001) argument has been made here that when unchecked, economic expansion can rip through societies and leave gaps and conflicts behind, that may in turn support autocratization. To some extent non-governmental organization can mend immediate needs. Still, in the long run a well-governed state that respects universal rights is necessary to balance the needs of the citizens and to bridge gaps in society to make democracy work.

More is provided in the accounts here that tell us something about how *perspectives* on democracy have changed fairly recently. If the autocratization trend we see now was only about economic redistribution and sustainable development, party politics could have evolved where the fight for the support of the voters would have been played out along a left–right spectrum – by competing with different policy strategies and within a democratic framework. However, a substantial share of the political parties in this region has been caught in the wave of populism which increasingly defines politics in the world today. This region of the world has undoubtedly seen its share of this political phenomenon long before the most recent populist wave (Chatterjee 2020). However, the proliferation and intensity of populism is now unprecedented. The core feature is to declare political opposition in any shape and form as illegitimate (Müller 2016). But this standpoint is not only a *cause* of autocratization, it is a *symptom* of it. There is even more to be said about why the populist agenda is gaining so much appeal than

what is brought forward in this book. However, political leaders have understood that there is a strong support for populists as well as politically intolerant views among voters (Widmalm and Oskarsson 2013). Since autocratization occurs in countries where elections are held, can we not draw the conclusion that the political leaders are even without guilt if they mainly listen to the voices of the people? When we try to understand the present conditions in this region, as well as in other parts of the world, there is one line of thought that immediately presents itself which connects to this argument that will be discussed in this chapter. The focus will be on deterministic perspectives on the decline of democracy which claim, expressed in a simplified way, that although democracy was an interesting and commendable project for a while, history finally lost its patience with it. Sentiments and incentives more deeply rooted than ideologies – which evidently political leaders themselves find hard to believe in – were destined to make a comeback. Eventually, culture, history, and economic forces, which always have had the strongest impact on how the world changes, would resurface and adjust development trajectories – no matter what political dramas that had played out at the centre stages of politics.

There are arguments located in deterministic perspectives that need to be taken seriously. Overlooking them would be a mistake. However, there is also a dangerous side to placing all the explanatory power on, for example, culture or economy as natural or unstoppable forces. The arguments speaking for them may be more seductive than true. The fact that several countries may behave in a similar way at one point in time may have other explanations than, for example, shared underlying historical conditions. Concerted political behaviour may be caused by high costs for individual states breaking away from a regime-context. There may be reasons and options that may be dictated by factors taught in the discourse on collective action for example, which decide regime trends. And accepting a deterministic explanation may entail taking an analytical shortcut which entails disregarding in-depth studies of political processes. Doing that may eventually provide legitimacy for the powers that promote autocracy. These dilemmas and questions are the focus of this chapter which is a part of the final section of this book which discusses how to comprehend autocratization in South Asia. By employing broad overviews, the three chapters discuss the role of historical factors, ideological currents and how the geopolitical context is influenced by China. The ambition is not to provide one big final argument which unites the contributions in this book. The idea is to take one step back and see what becomes apparent when a wider lens is used and how that may complement the perspectives in the previous contributions.

We begin with a discussion in this chapter on historical factors and agency. Then Johan Lagerkvist gives his view on how China affects its neighbours in this part of the world. And finally, David Lewis provides an analysis for understanding autocratization in South Asia via the writings of the influential illiberal political theorist Carl Schmitt.

Authoritarian regime convergence in South Asia

The trends described in general in Chapter one, and more in detail in the country specific chapters, show how the states in South Asia converge in the way they are governed to a place which has been described as electoral authoritarian (Alizada et al. 2021), or worse (see Chapter 1 for definitions of autocratization and regime types). (Alizada et al. 2021), or worse (see Chapter 1 for definitions of autocratization and regime types). Therefore, the first question is, were they always on their way there? The trend since independence until 2020 is described in Figure 28.1 using V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index which was presented in Chapter 1.

After independence and throughout the Cold War, authoritarian government was the rule in most states in South Asia. The exceptions in this regard, up until the early 1970s, were India

Figure 28.1 Electoral democracy (polyarchy) in South Asia, 1947–2020

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

and Sri Lanka, which managed to hold elections and to protect several of the basic liberties essential for democracy. A decline then set in, where both India and Sri Lanka joined their neighbours on the autocratic path. In India in 1975, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed the Emergency in an effort to put down violent protests and to suppress opposition parties. In Sri Lanka, the relatively open politics of the Bandaranaike era declined as communal conflicts grew in intensity. The democratic decline in India however proved to be temporary. The country saw 22 months of semi-authoritarian rule – and for a limited time its government declined into the authoritarian category. However, Gandhi ended the Emergency and India steered back to democracy, in a manner unique for countries that had been recently decolonized. The downward trend in Sri Lanka, on the other hand, led to civil war and ethnic purges. The time during which India's democracy was in rapid decline, around 1976, was the first time when all of the states of South Asia converged on non-democratic rule.

Then, for almost four decades, India stood out as an exception to the authoritarianism of its neighbours. It bears stressing that, inasmuch as India has such a large share of the population of South Asia (today almost 75 per cent), it can be misleading to give equal weight to all of the countries in the region when measuring democratic performance. Since independence, after all, a *majority* of the population in South Asia has lived under imperfect but nonetheless democratic rule – mainly thanks, of course, to India.

After the Cold War ended, moreover, there was a clear shift in the general pattern, as several countries in South Asia joined what has been called 'the third wave' of democratization (see Figures 1.1, 1.10 and 28.1). India seemed to be on a steady democratic path and democratization in Bangladesh was impressive. The general trend was greatly strengthened between 2004

and 2011. These years were when Afghanistan left the bottom of the scale, a more modern constitution was adopted under the leadership of Hamid Karzai and Nepal ditched its monarchy and became a secular state with democratic institutions. The civil war in Sri Lanka ended and even Pakistan seemed to prepare itself for a new and more democratic era after military rule ended in 2007. For a while, it certainly seemed that South Asia might converge on a fairly high level of democratic performance.

For several countries during this period, however, the situation can be described as volatile. And eventually there was the general downturn in democratic performance which has been the focus of this book. Sri Lanka made significant democratic improvements from 2014 to 2017, and it has even outperformed India since 2016. Nevertheless, the upward trend on the island seems to have been broken since 2018, mainly due to a worsening vulnerability of minorities and a shrinkage in the space for freedom of opinion and expression. It has also been claimed in contributions in this book that the foundation for democracy was never strongly established after the civil war to begin with. Nepal too, finally, has begun a slow descent on the democracy scale in the last few years (Nayak 2020). The gains in democratic performance seen not long ago have ceased or have even started to become undone by recent developments as South Asia joined the ‘third wave of autocratization’ (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). The rapid decline of democracy in Bangladesh, a democratization process which was lost in Pakistan, a fragile democratization process in Sri Lanka, and Modi’s authoritarian measure since 2014 led to the ongoing Episode of Autocratization (see Chapter 1) which means that South Asia has again, for the second time since independence, converged to authoritarian rule.

It is perplexing and surprising how fast the recent decline came about. And since the democratic decline has been so widespread it is tempting to see the current state of democracy as something created by some common denominator. After all, the Mughal Empire tied together what is now Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. These three states share more history with each other than with other countries in South Asia. Most of the territories now within these states were also a part of the Maurya Empire (from the fourth to the second century BCE), the Gupta Empire (from the fourth to the fifth century CE), and the Maratha Empire (the eighteenth to the nineteenth century). Subsequently the British Empire took control over most parts of India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Pakistan and Bangladesh. And then the region decolonized in 1947 and 1948. Much more recently, moreover, Bangladesh was part of Pakistan – from independence in 1947 until 1971.

This shared history is one of the main reasons why making comparisons between these countries has been such an attractive research strategy for understanding regime development. It is difficult to find study objects in the field of regime studies which can so readily be argued to constitute a natural experiment. The favourite cases for comparison in South Asia are India and Pakistan. Or, in the words of Maya Tudor in her research on regime development:

[T]he manifold structural similarities between India and Pakistan means that the comparison forms a rare social science approximation of a natural experiment in which many alternative explanations can be readily eliminated, thereby facilitating the task of drawing compelling causal inferences.

(Tudor 2013, p. 255)

The comparative literature reveals a number of institutional factors important for explaining different outcomes of democratization from 1947 until recently. For example the State Reorganization Act in India in 1956, which allowed state borders to more logically coincide with linguistic borders which then defused separatist demands in several regions (Basu and Kohli 1998;

Kohli 2001). And this paved the way for democracy. Although feudal structures remain in India's North, land reforms have had some effect for lessening the deep inequalities that can destabilize democracies (Engelsen Ruud 1996; Bhattacharyya 1994). In Pakistan province borders still cut across ethnic communities and feudal orders have continued to dominate political alliances and systems of patronage (Tudor 2013; Shami 2012). At the time of partition, civilian leaders in India managed to shape the administrative systems and hierarchies so that the military was brought under the control of the defence minister. In Pakistan the military retained their control. All mattered for a relative success for democracy in India and hybrid regimes in Pakistan.

Most political historians also point to the importance of structures that were established before partition. The British Empire did not provide a uniform system of governance in South Asia as provinces were under direct rule and princely states were controlled indirectly. And even within these categories the style of governance and degree of autonomy varied greatly. Also, provinces varied greatly in size, and recruitment for the armed forces was carried out according to a system where groups were classified as different martial races which would distribute forces with different ethnic backgrounds unevenly in different areas. This also mattered for democracy later (Wilkinson 2014; Tudor 2013; Tan 2005). Furthermore, political elites in very different political parties grew increasingly important in the nineteenth century and until partition which certainly affected the capacity to establish civilian rule and democratic traditions in India and not in Pakistan (Tudor 2013; Jalal 1995). Natural, financial, and institutional resources were distributed in such a way that gave a great advantage to India to create a more stable development compared to the conditions that Pakistan provided (Jalal 1995). And, Pakistan was also affected by the refugee crisis in 1947 in ways that differed from India's experience (Talbot 2020). Consequently, India and Pakistan were not identical twins separated in 1947. Political and civil life developed differently because of legacies tracing roots much further back in time.

Nevertheless, even though there are no perfect natural experiments – and South Asia is no exception – research with comparative perspectives has undoubtedly been able to provide a more thorough and systematic understanding of the different paths that states in South Asia have trodden – in particular those leading to or from authoritarian rule. Institutions and resources do matter, political culture does too.

And yet, states in South Asia are now mostly heading in the same direction. The question then is, have the comparisons of states in this region led us to the wrong conclusions? If most of South Asia now has ended up in the authoritarian category, was not the post-colonial era just an interlude while waiting for the recent convergence? It is tempting to draw this conclusion. However, there is variation within all the countries that complicates the issue.

As Figure 28.1 shows, Bangladesh is the most authoritarian state in South Asia currently. This reflects how the Awami League and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina have turned Bangladesh to what increasingly looks like a one-party state (Riaz 2019; Engelsen Ruud and Hasan Forthcoming 2021). The Awami League government has eliminated any free and effective political opposition. This includes the largest opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, the leader of which, Khaleda Zia, has been imprisoned. In addition, the proceedings at the International War Crimes Tribunal, and the convictions recently handed down by it, have been used effectively to suppress political opposition. Autocratization here is deeply rooted in poverty, a 'soft state', and what happened at independence in 1971.

Pakistan takes second place from the bottom in Figure 1.1 and third place from the bottom in Figure 28.1. Pakistan has never managed to achieve a consolidated democracy. It never radically reformed its feudal economy or separated the military from the centres of power. This has always limited the scope for democratization. Furthermore, it has repeatedly become entangled with the fate of Afghanistan and conflicts beyond its influence in a way which is unique in

South Asia. However, after its return to civilian rule in 2007, no less than three elections took place in that country, resulting in relatively peaceful shifts of power without any subsequent reversion to military rule. For several years there were clear improvements in Pakistan's political life, signalling an unprecedented democratization process. The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was clearly a part of this. Nonetheless, the past five years have seen a democratic setback, with restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom of association. Intimidation, torture, and the disappearance of journalists and civil-rights activists have substantially increased under the rule of Prime Minister Imran Khan and the PTI.

India shows the most important and dramatic change here, given its previous performance and its population of almost 1.4 billion. Sri Lanka thereby ranks higher than India currently – but its better democratic performance only benefits about 2 per cent of the population in the region. The decline in India in this regard has a profound effect on the whole region.

There was a slight downward trend in India's democratic performance beginning around 2013 – the final year of two consecutive Congress (I)-led governments. A much sharper downturn then got under way after the BJP came to power in 2014. Should the present trend continue, India's political system may reach the 'authoritarian' level – even lower than the level in 1975–1977 – within just a few years (Widmalm 2019a, b).

It is important to recall that the Congress (I), due to its penchant for dynastic principles of organization and its unwillingness or incapacity to keep checks on corruption, opened the door to a rival for power like the BJP. An even larger problem, from a democratic perspective, is what that rival did to democracy when it came to power. The steep decline from 2014 on is largely the result of a planned and sustained dismantling of democratic institutions pursued by the BJP government. And the BJP is a part of the Sangh Parivar which has roots going back a century. Since independence this movement has transformed and shaped India in a unique way. In spite of this, India long defied all predictions (Moore 1993) about the demise of its democracy.

Political scientist Rajni Kothari, however, provided perspective on the situation when he described India as supported by a steel frame consisting of a highly educated public sector, a fairly well-governed military, and the Congress Party – which together provided the stability needed for democratic consolidation (Kothari 1970). Nevertheless, the decline in the organizational structure of the Congress Party in the late 1960s, together with high levels of corruption, have since lessened India's capacity to absorb and channel the strong political engagement of its citizens and their demands for reform (Kohli 1990). Moreover, in more recent years parts of civil society with intolerant attitudes towards minorities have aligned themselves with like-minded forces at the level of India's constituent states, and even at the national level (Basu 2015; Widmalm 2016). The Hindutva movement is pursuing chauvinistic nationalist goals, while the Congress Party has withered dramatically. The BJP, by linking up effectively with actors in civil society, has acquired an unprecedented grip on the politics and political culture of India. Its outspoken ambition is to create a Hindu Rashtra – the Hindu version of an ethnic state. The contributions to this book provide detailed accounts of how the BJP government has pursued policies which differentiate civic rights along ethno-religious lines, and Hindutva-tied organizations on the ground have provided the muscle power – intimidating and even killing journalists, defenders of civil rights, and members of minority religious groups (Basu 2015). The strategy pursued by the government of Prime Minister Modi consists mainly of mimicking the leadership styles of the Pakistani and Chinese regimes. Until recently, it was hard to imagine how this could be done in South Asia, with its great diversity. For it was actually India's diversity, paradoxically enough, that was seen as the glue which kept it together, according to such scholars as Paul Brass (Brass 1990), Arend Lijphart (Lijphart 1996), and Yogendra Yadav, Juan Linz, and Alfred Stepan (Stepan, Linz, and Yadav 2011). Yet this diversity has not been

enough, evidently, to stop the country's downward trajectory on the democratic scale. As some contributions to this book suggest, it may however be what brings India back on track to democracy. But such changes are not in sight now.

Sri Lanka, just like India, had a successful start for its democracy. At independence, universal suffrage had been in place for sixteen years since the introduction of the Donoughmore Constitution. Although the early history of Sri Lanka had differed greatly from India's, there were two decades after independence when the two countries seemed to travel on the same democratic path. Although they did separate themselves from each other, as India managed to keep its democracy alive while Sri Lanka did not, similarities remained. India experienced conflicts in Punjab and Kashmir, at the same time as Sri Lanka was increasingly plagued by a civil war. During these conflicts, in both countries, ethnic and chauvinistic nationalism took new forms which then shaped a new generation of political leaders which today are leading populist political campaigns in each respective country.

Evidently, even though comparative perspectives have shed light on different regime trajectories during the last 70 years, we have no coherent explanation for why South Asia has for a second time converged on authoritarianism. But there is a contender.

After the end of British colonial rule, and then after the end of the Cold War, the influence of the West and of Russia respectively in the region dramatically diminished. China has taken centre stage. Once the Cold War alliances broke down, was it not obvious that clashes of interest would be manifested in a pattern whereby different actors mainly aligned themselves on the basis of identities – identities which, while previously suppressed, were deeply rooted historically and culturally? In this region, the salient cultural, religious, and historically rooted identities can be labelled Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and Confucian. As Samuel Huntington claimed, moreover, the world can be seen as divided by borders delineating different regions with shared cultures, historical experiences, and above all religious traditions (Huntington 1993: 23–24). Huntington argued that, after the Cold War, *civilizations* would re-emerge as the highest order of organization (Huntington 1993). From this perspective, the Cold War served to suppress basic characteristics, thereby creating a false image of the world in which civilizational fault lines were hidden. As soon as the different civilizations re-emerged, moreover, they would clash with each other, largely due to their inherent contradictions with one another. Huntington described the civilizations of South Asia as non-secular, and as animated by values and beliefs that are far from democratic. In these respects he drew an explicit contrast with the West:

Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state, often have little resonance in Islamic, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, Buddhist or Orthodox cultures.

(Huntington 1993: 40)

It was thus expected that the West would lose its influence in South Asia eventually, and that states in the whole region would converge on a non-democratic political order – albeit perhaps in variable ways. Empirically, is that not what we see in Figure 28.1? Naturally, Huntington has been criticized for his generalizations and coarse categorizations, and for his penchant for portraying Western civilization as superior and morally most enviable. However, even if we steer clear of how Huntington ranked civilizations, we may find his controversial thesis troubling when we seek to understand South Asia. Already in 1993, Huntington made some highly prescient warnings regarding India's trajectory, and about the future role of Hindutva political forces and their project of building an ethnic state.

The historic clash between Muslim and Hindu in the subcontinent manifests itself now not only in the rivalry between Pakistan and India but also in intensifying religious strife within India between increasingly militant Hindu groups and India's substantial Muslim minority. The destruction of the Ayodhya mosque in December 1992 brought to the fore the issue of whether India will remain a secular democratic state or become a Hindu one.

(Huntington 1993: 33–34)

For all his faults, Huntington early espied a threat to India's democracy which scholars of South Asia too long underestimated. Moreover, it is striking how leaders all over Asia have taken increasingly to emphasizing cultural identity to provide legitimacy for non-democratic behaviour. The Hindutva movement in India is a clear example hereof, as it is openly promoting the creation of a 'Hindu state' – the Hindu *Rashtra*. Furthermore, China under Xi Jinping increasingly resembles the China of the 1960s, under Mao Zedong. In its efforts to achieve greater influence, moreover, China is increasingly relying on hard power (Nye 2000) and showing an open disdain for democratic values. There is one important difference, however, in how Xi Jinping portrays China's culture. Mao Zedong rejected Confucius, whereas the Chinese Communist Party today hails him as an important 'symbol of Chinese culture' (Dhull 2017). The West, on the other hand, is described in this context as 'decadent' (Stevens 2020). There are thus many current trends and political declarations that fit well with Huntington's idea of a Clash of Civilizations. The political rhetoric deployed by leaders in South Asia is in no way encouraging their countries to move upwards on the democracy scale. China sets the tone as it is feared in the region, but it has also long been admired for its ability to 'get things done'. Time and again, Xi Jinping is depicted as resolute and proud of his country's identity, and as someone who does not get stuck in all the squabbles and time-consuming diversions that democracy creates. The two final chapters of this book will provide an analysis which is very relevant to this.

Nor is it just political leaders in South Asia who regard China's regime culture as useful for providing legitimacy, and thus as worth mimicking. Populists in the West turn admiring eyes to China as 'democracy' and 'liberalism' seems to become something which is desired less among intellectuals both on the left and right, and among the young (Mounk 2018; Krastev and Holmes 2019). In practice, those in power who at least officially find the Huntingtonian way of thinking compelling are also drawn away from democracy. And it is fairly easy to point to all the conflicts within and between countries of South Asia – where mobilization has been predominantly along ethnic lines – as phenomena that can be termed civilizational.

Nevertheless, while we must acknowledge that central political actors are embracing Huntington's claims about how civilizations clash and that this appeals to electorates, there are several reasons not to accept Huntington's world view or the logic it sets out regarding conflicts and autocratization. With regard to South Asia, the most compelling reasons to be sceptical of the civilizational hypothesis are provided in the studies mentioned earlier which have treated South Asia as the scene of several political natural experiments. These studies have shown that, for more than seventy years, India managed to perform relatively well as a democracy in spite of its 'Hindutva' heritage. The political history of Sri Lanka, moreover, has exhibited variations which do not correlate with changes in its 'culture'. Furthermore, the fact that Nepal, and even Afghanistan have experienced dramatic changes in regime type, suggests that a deterministic approach here is problematic to say the least. In particular, the fact that democratic performance in Afghanistan could improve so quickly after 2001 was unexpected by many political scientists and political actors. And so was the speed of autocratization in 2021.

To this picture should be added the fact that Pakistan's strongest partner in the region is China. This relationship has thrived even though China is pursuing large-scale campaigns for the ethnic cleansing of religious minorities (including Muslims). China's concentration camps for Muslims are located very close to the Pakistan border – a fact which furnishes a natural (and of course horrible) experiment that speaks against Huntington's hypothesis. If Pakistan is supporting violent separatists crossing the Indian border into Kashmir mainly for cultural or civilizational reasons, then why is it not doing the same for Muslims in China's Xinjiang province? And if Hindus and Confucians see Muslims as a kind of 'civilizational enemy', how is it that India and China are not turning against Pakistan and Bangladesh together?

If we are to understand conflicts, we must indeed appreciate the importance of differences in values, culture, and views on history. It is another thing, however, to say that these are always the reason why conflicts arise or when democracy is failing. When Huntington formulated his Clash of Civilizations hypothesis, he did so on the basis of a very selective reading of history. In fact, his manner of proceeding – of making the civilizational explanation the overriding one simply by choice, rather than scientific support – resembles the arguments proffered by those who conduct nationalistic campaigns. Or, as the historian Eric Hobsbawm famously put it: 'History is to nationalism what poppy is to an opium addict'. This by no means implies, be it noted, that *all* conflicts where groups are mobilized on the basis of their identity are simply *constructed* by populists. Ethnic identities are built by wars, struggles for freedom, gains and losses, and other highly complicated events and phenomena; they are not simply inserted into people's minds as 'constructions'. They are also lived experiences, or parts of a living memory. Even so, this scarcely proves the world is divided into crude civilizational units doomed to collide. Culture is a core feature of people's identity, but it does not decree that everyone will clash – at least not by violent means. Kwame Ture thought overt conflict unavoidable, but Martin Luther King did not. And Nathuram Vinayak Godse did, but Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi did not. There is little proof ethnic identities are always the prime mover behind political outcomes. The Kashmir conflict in South Asia, for example, is commonly seen as an ethnic conflict in the sense that cultures clash in irreconcilable ways (Widmalm 2006). A deeper analysis shows that while ethnic mobilization has been important in the region, the conflicts over the years have roots in unresolved questions relating to autonomy since partition. It is evident, however, that political actors in South Asia, as in other parts of the world, find arguments relating to ethnicity, economics, culture and history serviceable not only for gaining support, but also for evading responsibility for having whipped up feelings that can escalate into violence. It becomes convenient in such cases to depict 'the power of the people' metaphorically as a 'natural force' which generates values and produces outcomes that leaders cannot control, or are 'forced' to follow (Gilmartin, Price, and Ruud 2020; Widmalm 2006). Rhetorical constructions of this kind – with the displacement of agency which they entail – are a part of politics.

When it comes to the Clash of Civilization-argument, Huntington's argument is a kind of 'just wait and see' argument; he gave no sell-by date for his predictions. Since politics involves processes of change, he will likely prove right at some time and in some place. Even a broken clock is right twice a day. The main counter-argument here is that conclusions about the authoritarian turn in South Asia relying on deterministic perspectives would deliberately have to overlook counter-cases and counter-arguments provided by a variety of trajectories since independence. The civilizational hypothesis is not always irrelevant. It is rather that it becomes deterministic, because of how it overlooks far-reaching regime variations, and how it disregards the large number of studies which have shown how such variations have come about.

What can reverse autocratization in South Asia?

Democracy's downward trajectory in South Asia is a disaster for human rights, minorities, free speech, media freedom, and academic freedom. For individuals on the ground, it means being attacked for belonging to the wrong religion, or being sent to prison for speaking truth to power. The Covid-19 crisis has added to the suffering immensely and also made it easier for populists to push through autocratic policy measures. The convergence described here, therefore, deserves an analysis far less simplified than one where not only history and culture but also economics become residual categories. What is needed more of is an analysis which takes underlying causes of conflict into account, but then also combines them with in-depth studies of the reasons why leaders choose non-democratic political paths. Political leaders and their strategies are shaped by outside forces as well. In South Asia in general the most important influence now is from China. Its sphere of influence is continuing to expand, and the regime model which it advocated is not only authoritarian. Since the cost of technology for making use of surveillance and control systems has gone down dramatically, a sustainable totalitarian model of governance is more than ever before a realistic plan for leaders in Asia, as well as in other parts of the world. The threat to democracy is that it has become so easy to replace it. Not that civilizations inevitably must clash.

The country-chapters in this book, and previous research, show that South Asia is not predetermined to stay in the authoritarian category. All the protest movements described here that have turned against the forces of autocratization attest to this. It is however evident that breaking free from the current situation is very costly for a single state that wants to do so on their own. Either concerted actions from political parties in several states in South Asia could lead to a push for democratization. Or a single state, a very strong and influential one, well experienced already in how democratic governance works, could lead the way. India is the main contender. However, nothing along these lines is likely to happen as long as Narendra Modi is leading the BJP and the country. And it will not happen as long as the political opposition is in such a poor state as it is in now. If the opposition cannot learn to adapt to the new situation and coordinate its efforts with other political parties, this episode of autocratization will continue. And the longer it does, the harder it will be to revive democracy.

Bibliography

- Alizada, Nazifa, Rowan Cole, Lisa Gastaldi, Sandra Grahn, Sebastian Hellmeier, Palina Kolvani, Jean Lachapelle, Anna Lührmann, Seraphine F. Maerz, Shreeya Pillai, and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2021. *Autocratization Turns Viral – Democracy Report 2021*. Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, V-Dem Institute.
- Basu, Amrita. 2015. *Violent Conjunctures in Democratic India*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Basu, Amrita, and Atul Kohli, eds. 1998. *Community Conflict and the States in India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Bhattacharyya, Dwaipayan. 1994. "Limits to Legal Radicalism: Land Reforms and the Left Front in West Bengal." *The Calcutta Historical Review* 16 (1): 57–100.
- Brass, Paul R. 1990. *The New Cambridge History of India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chatterjee, Partha. 2020. *I Am the People: Reflections on Popular Sovereignty Today*, *Ruth Benedict Book Series*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Staffan I. Lindberg, Jan Teorell, Nazifa Alizada, David Altman, Michael Bernhard, Agnes Cornell, M. Steven Fish, Lisa Gastald, Haakon Gjerløw, Adam Glynn, Allen Hicken, Garry Hindle, Nina Ilchenko, Joshua Krusell, Anna Luhrmann, Seraphine F. Maerz, Kyle L. Marquardt, Kelly McMann, Valeriya Mechkova, Juraj Medzihorsky, Pamela Paxton, Daniel Pemstein, Josefine Pernes, Johannes von Römer, Brigitte Seim, Rachel Sigman, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jeffrey Staton, Aksel Sundström, Ei-tan Tzelgov, Yi-ting Wang, Tore Wig, Steven Wilson,

- and Daniel Ziblatt. 2021. Dem [Country–Year/Country–Date] Dataset v11.1. Edited by Varieties of Democracy Project.
- Dhull, Pardeep. 2017. “Once denounced by Mao, Confucius now being embraced by CPC.” *The Tribune*. www.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/world/once-denounced-by-mao-confucius-now-being-embraced-by-cpc-470739.
- Engelsen Ruud, Arild. 1996. “Land and Power.” *Modern Asian Studies* 28: 2357–2380.
- Engelsen Ruud, Arild, and Mubashar Hasan, eds. Forthcoming 2021. *Masks of Authoritarianism – Hegemony, Power and Public Life in Bangladesh*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gilmartin, David, Pamela G. Price, and Arild Engelsen Ruud. 2020. *South Asian Sovereignty: The Conundrum of Worldly Power*. Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge.
- Huntington, S. P. 1993. “The Clash of Civilizations.” *Foreign Affairs* 72 (3): 22–49.
- Jalal, Ayesha. 1995. *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kohli, Atul. 1990. *Democracy and Discontent*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kohli, Atul, ed. 2001. *The Success of India’s Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kothari, Rajni. 1970. *Politics in India*. Himayatnagar: Orient Longman.
- Krastev, Ivan, and Stephen Holmes. 2019. *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning*. London: Allen Lane, an imprint of Penguin Books.
- Lijphart, Arend. 1996. “The Puzzle of Indian Democracy: A Consociational Interpretation.” *American Political Science Review* 90 (2): 258–268.
- Lührmann, Anna, and Staffan I. Lindberg. 2019. “A Third Wave of Autocratization Is Here: What Is New About It?” *Democratization* 26 (7): 1095–1113.
- Moore, Barrington. 1993. *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy – Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Mounk, Yascha. 2018. *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How To Save It*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Müller, Jan-Werner. 2016. *What Is Populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Nayak, Ravi. 2020. “Democracy in Nepal Is under Threat.” *South Asia Journal*, 9 May. <http://southasiajournal.net/democracy-in-nepal-is-under-threat/>.
- Nye, Joseph S. 2000. *Understanding International Conflicts*. New York: Longman.
- Polanyi, Karl. 2001. *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. 2nd Beacon Paperback ed. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Riaz, Ali, ed. 2019. *Voting in a Hybrid Regime – Explaining the 2018 Bangladeshi Election, Politics of South Asia*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Shami, Mahvish. 2012. “The Impact of Connectivity on Market Interlinkages: Evidence from Rural Punjab.” *World Development* 40 (5): 999–1012.
- Stepan, Alfred, Juan J. Linz, and Yogendra Yadav. 2011. *Crafting State-Nations – India and Other Multinational Democracies*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Stevens, Philip. 2020. “Democracy Faces Bigger Threats than Vladimir Putin or Xi Jinping.” *Financial Times*.
- Talbot, Ian. 2020. “Pakistan Refugee State.” In *Refugee Crisis 1945–2000 – Political and Societal Responses in International Comparisons*, edited by Jan C. Janson and Simone Lässig, 83–104. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tan, Tai Yong. 2005. *The Garrison State: The Military, Government and Society in Colonial Punjab 1849–1947, Sage Series in Modern Indian History*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Tudor, Maya. 2013. “Explaining Democracy’s Origins: Lessons from South Asia.” *Comparative Politics* 45 (3): 253–272.
- Widmalm, Sten. 2006. *Kashmir in Comparative Perspective – Democracy and Violent Separatism in India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Widmalm, Sten. 2016. *Political Tolerance in the Global South – Images from India, Pakistan and Uganda*. London: Routledge.
- Widmalm, Sten. 2019a. Is India’s Democracy Really in Decline? *The Wire*.
- Widmalm, Sten. 2019b. Under Modi Govt, a Two-Pronged Attack on India’s Democracy. *The Wire*.
- Widmalm, Sten, and Sven Oskarsson. 2013. “Political Tolerance in India – Descriptions and Explanations from the Heartland.” *Asian Survey* 53 (3): 533–558.
- Wilkinson, Steven I. 2014. *Army and Nation – The Military and Indian Democracy since Independence*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.