

Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal

The Common Challenge of Democratic Statebuilding

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The challenge that all three countries face is building viable democratic states. While all three countries proceed from very different starting points, it is still possible to distinguish between a number of key tasks that they all have to engage with. One of them is relatively more short-term and is concerned with building resilient institutions of the state. The other is the relatively more long-term process of establishing a political culture that can underpin democratic institutions. While I shall focus on the former, it is important to point out that the latter is equally vital: without eventually being able to reconstitute a broad majority for stable peace and functioning democracy, institutions, however ingeniously conceived, cannot survive; and without generating popular domestic support for a common state project that establishes, across different segments and sectors of society, a basic consensus about, and commitment to, a set of norms, values and rules of the game, institutions will not be able to function properly and not enjoy the legitimacy necessary for their success. This kind of social transformation will require time, resources, and learning, and as such cannot but be a long-term, often cross-generational project.

This is, of course, problematic because in none of the three countries things can be left on their own until a social transformation of the kind described above has succeeded. Hence, it is crucial to focus on institutions in the short term and thus on putting in place the conditions in which democratic states can eventually emerge. The task here is twofold. On the one hand, all three states need to build structures of governance that offer all citizens opportunities for participation and representation. Given the complex political settings in each country, these structures need to incorporate proper checks and balances to ensure that, in true democratic fashion, minorities are neither permanently excluded and discriminated, nor that they can hold the majority or the state as a whole hostage. What is key, therefore, in the process of building structures of governance is not to become fixated on labels (such as federalism or power sharing), but rather to identify all the individual issues that need to be addressed, and find acceptable institutional solutions for each one of them, thus building a consensual overall solution step by step.

The other task, which directly flows from that of building the structures of governance, is to ensure the delivery a measure of quality of governance that can contribute to the very legitimacy of those structures by being able to demonstrate that they can accommodate and address the concerns of different segments and sectors of society. Success here is much helped by the issue-by-issue approach to building structures of governance suggested above as this allows taking account of available human capacities and resources. While it is important to be cautious and realistic about what institutions can achieve on their own under what will often be very constraining circumstances, this is not to belittle the role of leadership in all of the three countries. Skilled, determined, visionary leadership will remain one of the key requirements for success. Neither will it be possible to make the often painful compromises and concessions necessary for achieving an agreement on new institutions, nor is it likely that public support can be garnered to sustain them without clear and enthusiastic public commitment on the part of those making the concessions and offering compromises.

Viable structures of governance that deliver quality governance are essential for resilient states. In the circumstances faced by Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal, the democratic states that need to be built will have to be resilient to both domestic and external challenges. This relates to questions of security (some challengers to compromise will require a security response as they are unlikely to be included in a meaningful and functional common state) and services provision (previously excluded sectors and segments of society must be given meaningful opportunities to participate in all areas of the common state). It also requires an ability to manage constructively issues at a regional level (such as cross-border links of insurgent groups) and more globally (such as the challenges posed by climate change, environmental degradation, food security, etc.).

This leads me to my final point. While none of the three countries may rank on top of the list of current geopolitical problems, the international community should not leave them alone in dealing with the difficulties of building democratic states. On the contrary, there is a responsibility on the part of key regional and international actors to support actively the efforts currently under way. This relates to offering specific support in the short term to overcome momentary obstacles and to commit to long-term support in assisting all three countries in what cannot but be a long and hazardous road to truly democratic states. It also requires international efforts to build broad domestic and regional coalitions in support of the compromises that will necessarily have to be made in order to build states that are not simply democratic in name but have earned this characterization because they are responsive to the needs of all their citizens and because they offer them opportunities for meaningful participation and representation.