

# Liberalism Today Freedom First 2008

## South Asia

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### Liberalism in South Asia

#### Introduction



Map of South Asia showing types of government and the dates of independence or introduction of democracy

[South Asia](#) comprises of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. One of the most populous regions of the world, it is characterized by phenomenal cultural diversity. Although major strides have been made in recent years, it is classified as a 'developing region'. Most of the countries in the region were colonies of Britain gaining independence in the mid-20th Century.

Authoritarian rule has always posed a huge challenge in the region which raises its ugly head in varying degrees in various countries. India follows a multi-party democratic system, which in spite of notable progress, is plagued with inefficiencies. This contrasts with weak democratic systems elsewhere in the subcontinent. Bangladesh, Bhutan, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka have periodically lapsed into dictatorship or monarchy while the Maldives has been a single party state since independence from Britain in 1965.

Liberalism in the region is commonly understood as a political ideology which acknowledges rule of law, fundamental rights and a democratic system.

### History of liberalism

#### ECONOMIC FREEDOM IN SOUTH ASIA

COUNTRY	WORLD RANK
INDIA	59
BANGLADESH	92
PAKISTAN	93
SRI LANKA	96
NEPAL	118
AFGHANISTAN	142
BHUTAN	164
MALDIVES	188



The table below shows ratings given to South Asia. **Economic Freedom of the World Index:** The index published in Economic Freedom of the World measures the degree to which the policies and institutions of countries support economic freedom. The cornerstones of economic freedom are personal choice, voluntary exchange, freedom to compete, and security of privately owned property. With the help of certain indicators, a rating out of 10 is given to each country.

South Asia has had a tumultuous history characterized by imperial rule, monarchies, coups both by people and military and of course, landmarks where liberalism has made its presence felt. The last century actually saw liberalism emerging, both politically as well as economically. Efforts

have been on and are still in full swing to establish democracy. Latest example being that of Nepal where history will be created in April 2008 elections where the pro-democracy parties in the region are trying to abolish monarchical rule altogether in the region and having a federal republic in place. Bhutan also took similar action in 1998 where the King himself introduced political reforms, transferring most of his powers to the Prime Minister and allowing for impeachment of the King by a two-thirds majority of the National Assembly.

For Pakistan, It has been very unfortunate that in last 60 years there had been more than 20 Prime Ministers, whereas military ruled for 30 years, General Ayub Khan coup d'etat in 1958 ruled for 10 years, General Yahya Khan came in 1969 ruled for 3 years, General Zia ul Haq coup d'etat in 1977 ruled for 10 years, General Pervaiz Musharraf coup d'etat in 1999 ruled for 8 years as military dictator. The Constitution of Pakistan 1973 has been annulled or abrogated three times during General Zia and Musharraf Regime. The democratic government has strived to frame their constitution first it was drafted in 1956 then it was abrogated again Constitution 1962 was drafted but it was also abrogated due to some errors and flaws later a final and master piece was drafted during the democratic government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, who was later sentenced to death during General Zia regime for his continuous fight for democracy, rule of law and Constitution. Liberalism had its first victory when elections took place in 1972 and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was elected as the first Prime Minister. Thereafter, in the late 80s and 90s, elections happened again, and all eyes are again set for the upcoming elections 2008.

Sri Lanka, after its independence became the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, which was again a mixed blessing, democracy stepping in, albeit with the world 'socialism' in it. Bangladesh, born out of a conflict in 1971 between East and West Pakistan, has had political democracy, but widespread suppression of civil liberties. India after independence in 1947 saw the formation of the 'Swatantra Party', a party which espoused liberal thought and was founded by C Rajagopalachari amidst widespread speculation in the subcontinent. The party also managed to get some seats, but could not sustain itself. However, the effort made was remarkable amidst the Soviet euphoria that India was experiencing under Nehru at that time. Liberal history would be incomplete if one doesn't mention that over the last 20 years, this region has seen tremendous trade potential owing to opening of economies, South Asia has also seen larger awareness about human rights and more liberal groups networking across the region.

## Achievements of liberalism

Country	Score	Rank
Afghanistan	1.0	1
Libya	1.0	2
Sierra Leone	1.0	3
Yemen	1.0	4
Sudan	1.0	5
North Korea	1.0	6
Iran	1.0	7
North Macedonia	1.0	8
South Sudan	1.0	9
Central African Republic	1.0	10
South Africa	1.0	11
Democratic Republic of Congo	1.0	12

Source: Fragile States Index

**Failed States Index:** Compiled on the basis of 12 indicators, certain it is a useful tool to see the stability of a region, South Asia as a region doesn't fair very well because it gets a higher score on factors such as internal displacement, provision of public services.

Political and Civil Liberties Index

Index: 2005 to 2006, and 2006 to 2007 (100 being highest)

Country	Political Liberty	Civil Liberty
Bangladesh	24	21
India	49	45
Nepal	17	20
Pakistan	11	24
UN LADs	22	22

Source: Freedom House

## Personal and Civil Liberties Index.

- Economic:** Economically, the region in the last 2 decades has done very well mainly due to the liberal approach. Presence of **India - the fastest growing free market democracy** in the world is inspirational for its neighbors to replicate. Economic freedom ranking moved up 13 notches from 2005 to 2006 for India. Free trade, easy flows of FDI and a healthy domestic competition due to abolition of licenses has seen incomes grow, and a sudden rise in the affluence of the middle and the lower middle class. The **Micro Finance** revolution led by Mohammad Yunus in Bangladesh has given the poor access to credit and as opposed the socialist structure, doesn't see them as the 'needy' ones but those who 'need access'.
- Political:** Democracy is taking big strides in the region with Nepal expected to do away with monarchy altogether in April 2008. If this succeeds, then it would send a very strong message to all the civil movements across the world as to what can be done by sheer resurgence of liberal groups.
- Socio-Cultural:** Emergence of a strong human rights lobby has ensured that all sorts of assaults on the minorities are brought into the limelight. A free press has worked endlessly to bring such and more issues to the forefront. Media's achievements have been commendable in bringing news of importance from all over the world facilitating sharing of information. A democratic set-up has ensured that a diverse country like India recognizes the rights of all groups.
- Legal:** The 'Right to Information Act' has given people access to governmental records. Amendments have been made to give greater powers to Panchayats, thereby decentralizing governance and giving it to people, i.e. letting people govern themselves.
- Religious:** The Target or Sectarian killing was a burning issue in Pakistan which remain unresolved for last 15 years, all religious sect congregated to play effective role in abolishing it by resolving the religious disputes in light of Liberal values.
- Media:** Media has played pivotal role in focusing on all national and transnational issues and making it possible to reach out to the people in far flung areas with the perspective to get first hand information regarding the availability basic necessities of life like health, education, sanitation etc and also reach the root cause of fatal diseases transmit in specific areas like bird flu, Hepatitis, HIV, etc.

Achievements can be seen in terms of formation of groups like Youth Initiative, Future Youth Group, Liberty Institute, Liberal Youth Guilds, Liberal Forum and other many such groups who are striving to reach across to people with the message of liberalism.

### **Problems faced by Liberalism**

- **Economic:** SAFTA or the South Asian Free Trade Agreement took off but hasn't worked well so far due to mutual distrust in the region. Many economic barriers remain for small professions and agriculture. Bureaucratic delays sap the entrepreneurial spirit in the region and the 'anti-corporate' mentality makes it difficult to have policies such as school vouchers and private provision of public goods.
- **Political:** The region is still marred by Political instability in the region. There are major problems starting right from the way elections are held and governments are formed. Pakistan has an upcoming election but the amount of freedom given to the liberal/pro-democracy parties for campaign and the manner in which the elections are being held is undemocratic. The killing of a senior leader who had the highest chances of winning and the way President Musharaff proclaimed that there would be 'shoot on sight' orders if anyone tried to rig an election. It is like 'using authority to grant liberty. Although seemingly peaceful, Maldives has a one-party system which amounts to an authoritarian regime. In Sri Lanka, constitutionally, the division of powers is such that it gives the president a lot of control over the judiciary, and thus hampers the independent 'rule of law' to some extent. And Bangladesh faces the problem of not having institutionalized democracy, meaning, there are no checks by the judiciary and bureaucracy on the executive. Thus, the institutions for a functioning liberty are not present, or need a lot of work on.

Political parties also often undermine the basic tenets of restoration of democracy, rule of law, fundamental rights & justice. The ruling party promotes a hefty state, subsidies, quotas and reservation policies. These lead to systemic failures in implementing peace, reform policies and a 'dignitarian' society. The overarching presence of the military has made a mockery of liberty in some countries of South Asia.

- **Socio-Cultural:** Human Rights violations by extremist' groups and violence incited by state has been present in the region. There are problems of religious tolerance, Islamophobia as well as fundamentalism. There are ideological threats in the form of

competition portrayed as evil and liberalism as 'anti-poor' and 'pro-greed' by academics, media and other interest groups. Moral policing- banning books and art pieces is another threat to individual liberty. Examples are the court case against M.F. Hussain, and the fatwa against Taslima Nasreen in Bangladesh.

- **Legal:** Weak system of property laws acts as an impediment to curbing powers of the state and enforcing individual and community wealth creation rights. The insertion of the word 'socialist' in Indian constitution by Indira Gandhi by 42nd amendment to the Indian constitution resulted in no political party being able to register itself as a liberal party. (Though recently, Supreme Court held that 'socialist' means 'democratic' and 'welfare' and 'non-socialist' in 'Marxist' sense. Acts such as the AFSPA or the Armed Forces Special Powers Act

which give the military tyrannical powers, an example manifested in the rape of one Manorama Devi in Manipur, a state in India which had been under the act for the past few years.

### **Reasons for the strength or absence/weak presence of organized liberal forces**

**Strengths-** The presence of liberal forces has recently gotten a strong impetus due to the windfall from the opening of markets. This has led to more optimism about a more liberal economy.

**Weaknesses-** Liberals are perceived at the extreme end of ideology: e.g liberals in Pakistan as anti-religion and liberals in India, anti-poor. Local or national liberal role-models for people are absent. Presently there is no face, icon, organization or opinion-maker who can singularly stand for liberalism in the region. Lack of vibrant political leadership to undertake such dynamic changes is another reason. Most parties have policies like poverty eradication programs etc which have more vote-appeal, but no impact. Due to political instability, frequent elections and military takeovers, no party in power can actually implement long term policies. Coalitions with many agendas make it impossible to take firm and quick decisions. Due to vote-banks being communal, elections are fought more along these lines than actual issue or policy based lines. Liberal groups at present are small and scattered across the region who have invested in networking, and research but actual ground level changes and mass campaigns need to be conducted to gain people's trust.

### **What can be done to further the cause of Liberalism?**

The following steps can be taken to further the cause of liberalism:

**Economic-** Promoting intra regional trade among South Asian countries. At present the trade between the South Asian countries is barely 15%, which includes technological, educational and financial collaboration. Abolishing licensing for entry level professions. Freeing agriculture from the clutches of government. Public-private partnerships can be introduced through joint ventures in sustainable development works

### **Governance-**

- Political reforms: True and functional democracy representing people rights in legislature, more direct democracy than representative democracy.
- Federalism: States or Provinces must be autonomous bodies.
- Constitution being supreme law of the land safeguards and guarantees fundamental rights of citizens.
- Devolution of Power (Absolute power should not remain with Executive).
- Separation of Powers (Executive, legislature and Judiciary) require checks and balances.
- Ultra Vires: Any law or enactment passed against the fundamental rights be declared null or void by the Supreme Court.

- **Military Role:** The role of military should be confined to the protection of land against external aggression, military should have no role in politics, and must remain in barracks.
- **Equal representation:** Minorities, women and youth must be given due share in policy making.
- **Social and economical reforms** must be introduced to bridge the gap between public and private sector.
- **Monarchy** as in Nepal must be designated an honorary position in civil government like UK whereas and the real powers to be exercised by Prime Minister and his cabinet.

**Environment-** Right to land to tribals, recognition of them as 'keepers' and not 'encroachers' Joint forest management practices.

**Socio-Cultural-** Media need to be free from political influence. Social Problems: Abolishment of racial & religious discrimination. Secular policies to be promoted

**Education-** Promoting Access to quality and affordable literature, documentaries to public. Educational institutions mainly, Management, Social work, Mass communication, Human rights colleges/ universities need to be tapped and provided with quality literature. Giving students right to choice of education.

**Civil Society-** When Liberals talk in the language of the people, they succeed: Examples from the region: Islam teaches us tolerance and respect of other rights. (MMA) *Muthida Mujlis-e-Ammal*, a vibrant religious cum political party in Pakistan which represented all religious sects of the country, communicated the basic tenets of Islam and spread the message that is common in Islam and liberalism i.e. tolerance to combat a major problem of sectarian killing ( between Muslim sects, *shia* and *sunnis*) Grassroots organisations like *Pratigya* in India were able to talk to Naxals to convince them of school vouchers, all in the setting of a restricted area! Youth Initiative in Nepal was able to mobilize youth as a force which holds opinions in society. The civil society has played a vital role in South Asia in disseminating liberal values among common people.

Liberals need to unite in a structured way and need to have a strong leadership and a brand which people identify with. They need to act, show results and gain confidence to become a pressure group and a potential political party in every country of South Asia.

## Reference Materials

[Information uploaded by M. Ghani about Liberalism in Pakistan.](#)