



Deepening democracy in South Asia

Off square one

DELHI AND KATHMANDU

The region is able and readier to boot out governments

SOUTH Asians, nearly a quarter of the world's population, are no pushovers. Some 1.6 billion people—the entire region—now live within civilian-led democracies, however imperfect. South Asian voters are ever readier to eject out-of-favour rulers. In the year to May 2014, governments in six out of seven South Asian countries are likely to change.

In May voters ejected Pakistan's ruling Pakistan Peoples Party, the first time an elected government finished a full term and passed power to another. Bhutan's incumbent was kicked out after the tiny kingdom's second-ever general election, in July. Bangladeshis are poised to send the current ruling party packing, at polls expected on January 9th; this week in Bangladesh an interim government was created to oversee voting. And in India opinion polls point the ruling Congress party to the exit too, in a general election likely in May.

Two other South Asian countries held national elections this week. The Maldives is a long way from being a mature democracy. Until 2008, it had for decades been run by a dictator, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, still influential. Biased courts and an establishment set on shaping election results underscores how its institutions are not properly independent yet.

But at least a run-off on November 16th produced an elected president, after various failed attempts. Abdulla Yameen of the Progressive Party of Maldives scraped in with just over 51% support. The news

was met stonily by many in Male, the capital. The concern is partly to do with Mr Yameen's reputation. Mr Gayoom is his half-brother and is sure to be a looming presence. Both men have grown rich on oil deals and other opaque business with the Maldives' neighbours.

Yet democrats have some things to cheer. Though he easily won the election's first round in September, Mohamed Nashed conceded defeat in the run-off, with 48% of the votes. He says he will work from the opposition; only 46 years old, he expects to contest many more polls. Voting was not crudely rigged, as many thought it would be. Rather, it was repeated delays in holding the run-off that gave Mr Yameen time to get the backing of a third candidate.



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The electoral commission (unlike the courts) proved itself independent, which matters for parliamentary elections due in the spring.

Another South Asian country stumbling towards full democracy has more to celebrate. Nepal endured ten years of civil war against Maoist revolutionaries, until 2006. Then, in 2008, the Himalayan country abolished its monarchy, having already scrapped Hinduism as the national religion. Progress stalled. A Constituent Assembly, elected in 2008, repeatedly missed deadlines for writing a constitution. Elections to refresh that assembly and allow for a new government were twice put off.

But, on November 19th, polls at last went ahead (see picture). Voters were not cowed by threats of violence. In the days before polling a hardline faction of the Maoists enforced strikes and curfews and was probably behind bomb attacks. A lorry driver died from a petrol bombing, while a child was injured after opening an abandoned bag of explosives. The hardliners had hoped to disrupt the election and discredit a bigger, moderate Maoist wing that now prefers ballots to bullets.

They failed. Instead, voters roared their approval of democracy. Turnout was a record 70%. Results may prove messy, with the moderate Maoists underperforming and the remaining seats spread among parties representing castes, Marxism in different flavours, royalism, lowlanders' interests and more. Nepal's electoral system has both party lists and constituency MPs; a clear outcome is unlikely.

The mess will bring other delays, notably over who forms the next government—the establishment Nepali Congress may stake first claim—as well as writing the constitution. There, much disagreement remains, including over how much federalism the country should adopt, and whether the provinces should be defined ▶▶

by ethnicity. Meanwhile, some Maoists want presidential democracy, while some on the right want a ceremonial king. The constitution could take many more years to write.

Democratic progress that is both awkward and partial applies to much of South Asia. Only Sri Lanka is unlikely to get a change in government soon, though some think the president, Mahinda Rajapaksa,

will call a snap election late next year. He has just hosted an unusually controversial Commonwealth summit (see next story). Poisoned by the memory of its recent history of a civil war at whose denouement tens of thousands of civilians died, Sri Lanka, even though it is at peace, risks a drift towards authoritarianism, with Mr Rajapaksa digging into office. If so, he will be South Asia's odd man out. ■

done before March.

One option is to turn to South Africa for guidance. Its president, Jacob Zuma, has shared with the government and the Tamil National Alliance, which runs Sri Lanka's northern province after an election in September, a suggestion for a truth and reconciliation commission. But it is hard to believe that Mr Rajapaksa might follow through. Most of the proposals made by the government's own Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (the word "truth" was avoided in the title) are yet to be implemented. The government ordered the army to investigate a handful of war-crimes allegations brought up by the commission. The army exonerated itself.

Yet domestic pressure to do something more may increase. Even government-friendly newspapers are starting to warn the president that his troubles on this issue will not go away. Tamil and other politicians may also push harder. But, the summit over, some activists fear a government crackdown. People who met Mr Cameron during a visit to the north, including relatives of the disappeared, may be at particular risk of harassment and intimidation.

The president's popularity among majority Sinhalese Buddhists, meanwhile, is likely to grow. Already, they see him as a victim of an international conspiracy to bring about regime change in favour of a more pliable government. With India and the West looking less friendly than ever, it might be tempting for Mr Rajapaksa to lean even closer to China in the coming months. For all that, the president will remain as the nominal head of the Commonwealth for the next two years, where debate about his country is also likely to flare. Having asked to be in the spotlight, the Sri Lankan president can hardly complain about the heat. ■

Sri Lanka

After the circus

DELHI

A summit is not the public-relations success the president hoped for

"HAS the circus left town? Can I please return to Colombo now?" asked a Twitter user on the morning after leaders of the Commonwealth left the Sri Lankan capital after their summit ended on November 17th. With the circus gone, the police chief gave hundreds of policemen three days off to recuperate. Television advertisements touting the summit as a "victory"—hosted despite calls for the venue to be changed because of Sri Lanka's dismal human-rights record—will soon cease.

Whatever their differences about other matters, many Sri Lankans agree that bad publicity tops the list of what the costly shindig has achieved. International coverage focused heavily on persistent allegations that war crimes were committed against civilians in 2009 as Tamil Tiger rebels were crushed at the end of a brutal civil war; on the disappearances of people both inside the war zone and outside it, during and after the civil war; and on the suppression of the media.

The president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, had hoped that the hundreds of foreign journalists who converged on Colombo would ignore such matters in favour of reporting about the capital's newly landscaped parks and a magnificent line-up of garbed elephants. But at the three press conferences he attended, Mr Rajapaksa was questioned repeatedly about his failure to hold anyone to account for the deaths of nearly 40,000 civilians at the war's end. The Commonwealth secretariat's moderator asked, cringingly, whether anyone had any questions not to do with Sri Lanka and human rights. They did not.

The president and his hawkish government ought to have expected this, but apparently miscalculated. The meeting had been preceded by calls for a boycott. The prime ministers of Canada and Mauritius kept away, citing human-rights concerns (Canada has a large and vocal Tamil diaspora). In India, giving in to pressure from

potential coalition partners in Tamil Nadu, the prime minister, Manmohan Singh, also backed out. In all, only 27 out of 53 heads of government showed up—the lowest count in decades for a Commonwealth summit.

Of those who came, Britain's prime minister, David Cameron, used his visit to tell the government to carry out a credible and independent investigation into alleged war crimes by March, when the UN Human Rights Council next convenes. If it does not, he said, Britain would use its position on the council to press for an international inquiry.

The Sri Lankan government is bristling. Ministers ask who Mr Cameron is to issue deadlines to a sovereign country. The local press accuses him of playing for the votes of Tamils in Britain. But ministerial aides whisper that the government knows foreign governments are no longer buying its excuses. Something more might have to be



David Cameron in the Tamil north