

National Advisory Council on South Asian Affairs

On May 19-20, 2005, at the Cosmos Club in Washington, D.C., the National Advisory Council on South Asian Affairs (NACSAA) held its first bi-annual seminar to discuss democracy in South Asia. Given the large number of speakers, I mention only those that dealt with Muslim countries.

Abdul Momen (University of Massachusetts) stated that the outlook for democracy in Bangladesh is promising, because it has achieved multiparty democracy after military rule, has had positive growth rates since it became democratic, is self-sufficient in food, and is no longer a global basket case. However, the current government is facing major social problems, the flight of multinational corporations, increased political and religious violence, the growing influence of madrassahs, corruption, and non-enforcement of the rule of law. However, the government is very careful not to involve the army in such things.

Zillur Khan (University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh) spoke about identity and balance in Bangladesh vis-à-vis development and democracy. He stated that the root of Bangladesh is secular, not Islamist. In fact, Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) rose against Pakistan (then West Pakistan) due to its desire for freedom, tolerance, equity, and justice, not Islam. He then traced the struggle of a majority of Bangladeshis to prevent the government from turning their country into an Islamic state.

Vijay Sazawal (The Indo-American Kashmir Forum) stated that the outsiders who have entered Kashmir are not really open to the Kashmiris, who want a people-centered, as opposed to a land-centered, solution. According to him, the four pillars of any just and lasting solution are peaceful co-existence, democratic values, economic justice, and meeting the people's needs. Since 2004, there has been a change in the policy mindset. He claimed that economic justice is the biggest issue in both parts of Kashmir, that the leadership on both sides is totally corrupt and wedded to slogans, and that the real problem is the between the haves and the have-nots.

Ambassador Teresita Schaefer (Center for Strategic and International Studies) talked about Washington's promotion of democracy in South Asia, noting that it has been fairly selective and not really a priority. The emphasis now is on Iraq and the Near East, western Europe, and Australia. There has been some interest in South Asia, especially India and Sri Lanka. Surprisingly, she stated that it is not in Washington's interest to have true democracy in Pakistan.

Faruq Ahmad (political counselor, Embassy of Pakistan) said that democracy and development are important in Pakistan. His upbeat presentation portrayed a Pakistan that gets along with India, Afghanistan, and its other South Asian neighbors, as well as being engaged in a "more realistic" dialogue with India over Kashmir. It is a "popular misconception" that Islamabad is renegeing on its commitment to democracy; rather, it is following the existing roadmap. There is a lot of debate in Parliament – a "rowdy democracy" – but with few results. But this is a good sign, for people can talk and criticize the government. According to him, Pakistan has recognized the weakness in its educational system and Musharraf is trying to correct this by reforming the madrassah system. More importantly, there is now a fundamental consensus of what the problems are and how to solve them.

Ambassador Robin Raphael (former assistant secretary of state for South Asia) encouraged South Asians, both here and abroad, to explain the region to the United States, which knows very little about its progress. Right now, she claimed, Washington is concentrating on the Middle East (especially Iraq), which is moving in a democratic direction – an "alignment of forces" – that allows Washington to push for democracy there. While there are some policy contradictions, Washington no longer has an either/or policy or feels that it has to sacrifice democracy to realize its strategic interests.

Syed Akhter (Marquette University) spoke on ethnic diversity and its effect upon a nation's economic development. He said that it works in some cases (e.g., Canada and the United States), but not in others (e.g., Africa).

Japan, which has no ethnic diversity, underwent great economic growth and development in the 1970s; however, since 1990 it has stagnated. India has tried to accommodate ethnic diversity, with some success. In Pakistan, the army controls 40 percent of the economy and has economic, political, and street power. So, how can market forces prevail? The result: Pakistan is lower in the human development indices than both Bangladesh and India; its policies have not worked; it has low marks in health, education, and access to life's amenities; and it has very little trade (there is more trade between Bangladesh and India). He suggested that South Asia's borders be opened, that mutual trade be increased, and that transparency be implemented to lessen bureaucratic corruption.

Bishnu Poudel (council member) said that NACSAA representatives regularly visit South Asian capitals to acquaint American ambassadors with their activities in the United States (since 1979); meet with foreign ministers for the same reason; meet with some think tank people in the capital to share ideas; and have a country advisor in each capital to keep both sides informed each other's concerns. He urged South Asians to forget about their particular identities and look at the region as American citizens, for such an example might help South Asia solve some of its problems.

During their presentations and the lively question-and-answer sessions, the speakers raised questions that could be a seminar in themselves: Does the majority political party, elected democratically, have the right to disenfranchise the minority communities, as happened in Sri Lanka? Why did democracy survive in India, yet never become rooted in Pakistan? Based on the recent history of Russia, China, and India, is democracy always the best option? Should democratic parties be allowed to appeal to religious sentiments, as in India, to promote their own agendas? What is the difference in democratic practice in a nation that became democratic through education and its own efforts (Nepal), one that inherited it (Sri Lanka) from the former colonial master, and one that has given it only lip service (Pakistan)?

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