

Shift from Democracy to Populism in South Asia

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Abstract: *This article explores the purported shift from democracy to populism across contemporary South Asia. Using longitudinal data from V-Dem Institute, Freedom House and the Economist Intelligence Unit (2010–2024) it analyzes whether South Asia has encountered a statistically significant democratic backsliding coinciding with the rise of populist leaders in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. However on three grounds this article challenges the simple "shift from democracy to populism" narrative i.e. first, democracies in Southern Asia were never consolidated and strengthened liberal democracies but instead flawed electoral democracies with deep deficits, second democratic erosion cannot be attributed solely to populism but rather a symptom and mechanism through which executives have centralized power using ideological rhetoric and third the relationship is bidirectional or operates in both directions whereby democratic deficits create demand for populism and populist governments in turn exacerbate those deficits. Through comparative case analysis of India (Narendra Modi), Pakistan (Imran Khan), Bangladesh (Sheikh Hasina) and Sri Lanka (Gotabaya Rajapaksa) the article identifies four causal mechanisms underpinning the relationship between populism and democratic decline i.e. judicial capture, media intimidation, electoral manipulation and majoritarian exclusion. It concludes that South Asia has shifted not from democracy to populism but from flawed to illiberal democracy functioning as the dominant political logic. Recommendations include institutional insulation, civil society empowerment as well as regional democratic norms.*

Keywords: Democracy, populism, South Asia, democratic backsliding, illiberal democracy, majoritarianism

Introduction

In between the period from 2010 to 2024 Southern Asia witnessed a remarkable political transformation. Bharatiya Janta Party's government led by Narendra Modi in India presided over what the V-Dem Institute called a democratic backsliding from electoral democracy to electoral autocracy which is the first such downgrade for the largest democracy of the world. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's government led by Imran Khan in Pakistan mobilized anti-corruption populism, was ousted through a vote of no confidence and subsequently transformed

into an anti-establishment resistance movement while the military consolidated its control. Awami League of Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh consolidated the dominance of one party under populist-developmental rhetoric, the imprisonment of opposition figures and the curtailment of media freedom. Sinhala Buddhist populism under Gotabaya Rajapaksa in Sri Lanka contributed to economic collapse and ultimately to his flight from the country. Even Nepal once a hopeful post-conflict democracy has seen emergent populist tendencies even as its institutions have remained relatively resilient.

Global headlines have proclaimed a shift from democracy to populism in South Asia. But is this framing accurate? Does it capture the complexity of what has occurred? Before advancing this argument it is necessary to clarify the key concepts i.e. Democracy is widely regarded as an essentially contested concept. This study follows Robert Dahl's procedural conception of democracy a framework widely used in comparative political science as democracy requires the following institutional guarantees: (a) elected representatives (b) free and fair elections (c) universal adult suffrage (d) the right to run for office (e) freedom of expression (f) access to alternative sources of information and (g) associational autonomy or freedom of association. When all seven criteria are present Dahl characterized the system as polyarchy representing the closest empirical approximation to ideal democracy. Scholars further distinguish between liberal democracy which incorporates constitutional protection for minorities, judicial review and robust civil liberties as well as electoral democracy which requires only free and fair elections and basic political rights. Most South Asian states have at best functioned as electoral democracies characterized by significant liberal deficits. The shift question is therefore is whether South Asian countries are moving from electoral democracy toward a more degraded form namely electoral autocracy in which elections persist but are no longer free and fair, rights are systematically violated and opposition actors are harassed.

Following Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) this article defines populism as a thin-centered ideology that divides society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups i.e. the pure people versus the corrupt elite and argues that politics should express the general will of the people.

Three typologies are crucial as first is that populism is thin centered insofar as it does not provide a detailed or consistent policy agenda. It relies on host ideologies including nationalism, socialism and religious fundamentalism to provide substantive policy orientation. Second, populism is not inherently anti-democratic as it can enhance participation and representation but it is fundamentally illiberal insofar as it rejects minority rights, pluralism and institutional checks as obstacles to the will of the people and third is populists in power almost always weaken liberal democratic institutions even when they come to office through free and fair elections.

For Southern Asia, which is a region of deep ethnic and religious diversity, illiberal consequences of populism are particularly severe. When the people are defined in exclusionary terms such as Hindus in India, Sinhalese in Sri Lanka or Urdu-speaking Muslims in Pakistan minorities are cast not merely as outsiders but as enemies of the real or authentic nation.

Scholars offer four competing perspectives on the relationship between populism and democracy i.e.

1. Populism emerges when established elites fail to represent the people effectively. It can enhance political participation and force accountability. From this perspective populism is not a threat or challenge to democracy but its revitalization (Laclau, 2005).
2. Populism distorts and subverts democracy by overgeneralizing complex issues, demonizing opponents as well as inciting majorities against minorities. It displays a tendency toward authoritarian rule (Müller, 2016).
3. Democratic deficits including corruption, inequality and political unresponsiveness gives rise to populist demand. Populism is a symptom rather than a cause and treating democratic deficits may cause it to recede (Roberts, 2022).
4. Populism does not replace or simply corrupt democracy but rather it transforms it from liberal, pluralist democracy into illiberal, majoritarian democracy. Elections continue but rights shrink or contract and this is the essence of the illiberal democracy thesis (Zakaria, 1997; applied to South Asia by Jaffrelot, 2021).

This article adopts the fourth perspective as the most persuasive interpretation of today's South Asia. The region is not abandoning democracy as elections remain competitive and voter turnout remains high but instead it is abandoning liberal democracy as rights are eroded, judicial independence is constrained and freedom of media is increasingly curtailed. Populism serves as the ideological vehicle through which this transformation occurs.

This article posits that the simple shift narrative is misleading or distorted in three ways. First, in Western European sense from the South Asian democracies were never liberal democracies but rather they were always flawed i.e. clientelist, elite-centric, institutionally underdeveloped and subject to military intervention. What has shifted is not democracy to something else but instead a transformation from one form of flawed democracy (party-hegemonic, elite-brokered) to another form (leader-dominated, majoritarian).

Second, populism did not enter South Asia as an external phenomenon but rather it emerged organically from democratic deficits including parties that ceased to represent citizens, corruption that went unpunished and institutions that increasingly served the powerful. Populism is simultaneously a manifestation of democratic failure and an illiberal response to that failure.

Third, democracy and populism do not exist in zero-sum relationships as populism can enhance some democratic goods such as political participation particularly among previously excluded groups while simultaneously decreasing others including minority rights, judicial independence as well as press freedom. Any assessment of a shift must disaggregate or break down democracy into its constituent components.

This article proceeds as follows. Section two presents empirical data on democratic decline and the rise of populism across South Asia (2010–2024). Section three conducts a comparative analysis of four country cases delineating shared mechanisms. Section four critically evaluates the 'shift' narrative and advances an alternative framing, namely a transition from flawed democracy to illiberal democracy driven by populist logic while section five concludes the study and offers recommendations.

Empirical Trends: Democratic Decline and Populist Rise (2010–2024)

Measuring Democracy: V-Dem Data

The V-Dem Institute provides one of the most comprehensive datasets on its liberal democracy index (LDI) ranges from 0 (least democratic) to 1 (most democratic). For South Asia the index reveals the following trends:

Country	LDI 2010	LDI 2015	LDI 2020	LDI 2024	Change (2010-2024)
India	0.67	0.65	0.59	0.53	-0.14
Pakistan	0.48	0.45	0.42	0.40	-0.08
Bangladesh	0.42	0.39	0.35	0.33	-0.09
Sri Lanka	0.58	0.56	0.52	0.49	-0.09
Nepal	0.52	0.54	0.55	0.56	+0.04

All four major South Asian democracies experienced declines in their scores of liberal democracies while Nepal which restored democracy in 2006 after a civil war recorded modest improvements suggesting that democratic decline is not inevitable but contingent on political choices and institutional dynamics.

Freedom House which publishes the annual freedom in the world score ranging from 0 (least free) to 100 (most free) reveals a similar pattern of decline across South Asia as India fell from 77 in 2010 to 67 in 2024, Pakistan from 55 to 49, Bangladesh from 56 to 39 and Sri Lanka from 65 to 54.

Measuring Populism: Populist Leaders in Power

The Global Populism Database (Hawkins et al., 2019) classifies leaders as populist based on their rhetoric and political behavior. By this measure India's Narendra Modi (2014-present) is coded as a full populist with Hindutva serving as the host ideology. Imran Khan of Pakistan (2018-2022) is coded as a full populist with anti-corruption nationalism serving as the host ideology underpinning his populist appeal. Bangladesh's Sheikh Hasina (2009-2024) is classified as a partial populist who incorporates populist elements while her governing strategy remained for the most part developmentalist. Sri Lanka's Gotabaya Rajapaksa (2019-2022) is coded as a full populist with Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism serving as the host ideology providing the foundation for his populist appeal while in Nepal no leader is coded as populist though K.P. Sharma Oli had populist moments but not sustained or prolonged.

There is strong albeit imperfect, correlation between populist leadership and democratic decline. Bangladesh declined under partial populism of Hasina; India experienced a sharp democratic decline under the full populist leadership of Modi while the decline of Pakistan was moderate under full populism likely because the military rather than Khan retained control over key institutions.

The Timing Question: Which Came First?

A critical question for the shift narrative concerns temporal ordering. Did democratic deficits precede the rise of populism or did populist leaders generate those deficits?

The evidence suggests a bidirectional relationship though with a temporal lag as in India, democratic deficits including corruption scandals, dynastic politics as well as unresponsive governance were already evident during the 2000s under the Indian National Congress. Consistent with this the V-Dem Institute Liberal Democracy Index declined from 0.71 in 2005 to 0.67 in 2010 prior to Modi's rise. Populism accelerated an existing trajectory of democratic decline. In Pakistan democratic deficits have been structural since independence characterized by recurrent military interventions and chronically weak civilian institutions. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's populist appeal emerged in response to the revelations of Panama Papers in 2016 which intensified existing public distrust of political elites while in Bangladesh democratic backsliding was already underway during Sheikh Hasina's 2009-2014 tenure prior to the intensification of her populist discourse.

Thus, the causal arrow runs in both directions as democratic deficits produce populist demand which leads to populist governance that further exacerbates those deficits and generates renewed populist demand (e.g., democratic deficits → populist demand → populist governance → deeper deficits → more populist demand). The outcome is a self-reinforcing vicious cycle rather than a simple linear shift or one-directional transition.

Country Case Studies: Mechanisms of Democratic Decline

India: Majoritarian Populism and Institutional Capture

Democratic decline of India under Modi has been both the most consequential and most extensively studied in the region. The central mechanism is majoritarian populism where 'the people' are defined primarily as Hindus who constitutes roughly 80% of the population while minorities including Muslims, Christians and Sikhs are portrayed as groups historically appeased by secular elites or more starkly as anti-national elements.

Judicial capture: The central government has increasingly appointed judges perceived as ideologically aligned with ruling establishment. In 2021 four senior judges of the Supreme Court of India publicly criticized the Chief Justice over case allocation practices they argued favored the government. In addition, several retired judges have accepted political appointments raising concerns about the erosion of judicial independence.

Media intimidation: Critical journalists have been arrested under anti-terror legislation. Media outlets that criticize the government face regulatory and financial pressures including tax audits, advertising withdrawal and criminal proceedings or police cases. As a result, many outlets have subsequently self-censored or become openly pro-government.

Electoral manipulation: The Election Commission, once seen as an independent constitutional authority, has faced allegations of partisan bias permitting Prime Minister Narendra Modi to continue campaign activities while restricting opposition rallies, delaying by-elections in opposition-held constituencies as well as failing to consistently enforce campaign finance laws.

Minority exclusion: The 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) created an expedited citizenship track for non-Muslim refugees while excluding Muslims. The National Register of

Citizens (NRC) process in Assam made millions stateless disproportionately affecting Muslims. Article 35A, which had protected land and residency rights in Kashmir was also revoked.

By 2024 the V-Dem institute classified India as an ‘electoral autocracy’ where elections continue but are held under unfair conditions, opposition actors are harassed and civil liberties are increasingly constrained. The transformation is therefore not best understood as a shift from democracy to populism but instead from flawed democracy to illiberal democracy with populism functioning as the legitimizing ideology.

Pakistan: Anti-Corruption Populism and Institutional Chaos

Pakistan presents a distinctive case because the military remains the ultimate political authority. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) of Imran Khan rose on anti-corruption populist platform directed against the dynastic parties of the country i.e. Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) and Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) and successfully mobilized urban youth as well as Pakistani diaspora. PTI won the 2018 general election and governed until 2022 post which was transformed into an anti-establishment resistance movement following the removal of Khan through a parliamentary vote of no-confidence.

Judicial weakness: Judiciary of Pakistan has oscillated between periods of relative independence and institutional deference. During Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf’s tenure courts actively pursued corruption cases against opposition leaders. Following Khan’s removal, the judiciary upheld or confirmed his disqualification and validated delays in the electoral process. Throughout these shifts the judiciary has largely avoided direct confrontation with the military establishment.

Media intimidation: Under Khan opposition leaders faced restrictions on live media coverage while critical journalists were subjected to legal proceedings as well as tax investigations. Having benefited from relatively open media space while in opposition PTI employed similar intimidating and coercive measures against its critics once in power reflected broader patterns of political practice in Pakistan.

Electoral manipulation: The 2018 general election that brought Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf of Khan to power was widely seen as military-managed at the expense of Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N). By contrast the election in 2024 was marked by extensive constraints on PTI including the denial of its electoral symbol, mass arrests of party activists and internet shutdowns. PTI has thus been both a beneficiary and a victim of electoral manipulation.

Institutional chaos: Pakistan continues to oscillate between competitive elections, short-spanned civilian governments and recurrent military intervention. Populism of Imran Khan and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf intensified such instability by directly challenging the military which is an informal taboo that most previous civilian governments had largely observed. Albeit Khan remained imprisoned through much of 2024 PTI’s popular support endured suggesting that populist mobilization can persist despite sustained restraint.

Bangladesh: Developmental Populism and One-Party Dominance

Awami League under Sheikh Hasina combined elements of developmental populism, blending anti-Islamic and pro-poor rhetoric with a record of rapid economic growth. Hasina ruled from 2009 until her resignation in August 2024 when an uprising led by students forced her to flee to India. Her regime indicates how populist framing can coexist with and potentially legitimize a gradual process of democratic backsliding.

Judicial capture: In 2018 the government of Sheikh Hasina abolished the non-party caretaker government system in doing so removing the only neutral mechanism for overseeing or supervising national elections. Judges perceived as critical of the regime were thereafter transferred or forced into retirement.

Media intimidation: Bangladesh recorded the lowest levels of press freedom in Southern Asia under Sheikh Hasina. Critical media outlets were shut down while journalists faced arrest and imprisonment under digital security legislation.

Electoral manipulation: After 2014 the elections in Bangladesh were widely assessed as neither free nor fair. The 2014 election was boycotted by the opposition while the 2018 and 2024 elections were marked by the mass disqualification of opposition candidates.

Institutional Collapse: Political overreach of Sheikh Hasina including a controversial quota system perceived to favor loyalists of the ruling party which sparked large-scale protests in 2024. Security forces reportedly killed hundreds of protesters despite the fact that the military declined to intervene against the civilians. Hasina ultimately fled the country leading to the establishment of an interim government.

Sri Lanka: Nationalist Populism and State Collapse

Populist episode of Sri Lanka (2019–2022) ended in economic and political downfall providing perhaps the clearest regional illustration of the vulnerabilities associated with populist rule. Gotabaya Rajapaksa won office on a platform of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist populism that integrated anti-Tamil, anti-Muslim, anti-Western NGO and anti-elite appeals directed against the preceding technocratic government.

Judicial capture: The 20th Amendment (2020) to Sri Lankan constitution restored extensive presidential immunity reversed many of the checks on executive authority introduced by the 19th Amendment to the constitution of Sri Lanka and notably expanded authority of the president over judicial appointments. Although the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka stood against some measures but was ultimately powerless to prevent executive consolidation.

Media intimidation: Gotabaya's government shut down news websites, arrested journalists including under terrorism-related charges and imposed internet shutdowns during periods of mass protests. The 'white van' culture of enforced disappearances long associated with Rajapaksa's political era returned.

Electoral manipulation: Although the 2019 election in Sri Lanka was widely considered free and fair however subsequent populist policy choices contributed to severe economic collapse after which political change occurred outside the electoral arena. The government was ultimately overthrown through mass street protests during the Aragalaya movement in 2022.

Minority exclusion: Pandemic and policy responses of Sri Lanka caused significant ethno-religious and regional grievances. Muslim communities were forced to cremate COVID-19 victims in violation of Islamic burial rites while Tamil-majority areas experienced heightened military deployments. In addition, the 2021 fertilizer ban disproportionately or unfairly affected small farmers many of whom were Tamil exacerbating existing socio-economic and ethnic inequalities.

Trajectory of Sri Lanka was not a transition from democracy to Populism but from a fragile or unstable democracy to a failed state with populism serving as the immediate catalyst. The primary lesson is that populism, when unaccompanied by sound economic management, leads not to illiberal democracy but to the collapse of the state.

Nepal: The Resilient Exception?

Nepal stands as principal positive case of the region recording a moderated improvement in its V-Dem Institute Liberal Democracy Index (approximately +0.04) and experiencing no sustained period of populist rule. Its post-conflict institutional design mainly ethnic federalism and proportional representation appear to have mitigated the regional trend toward democratic erosion. At the same time relatively small size of Nepal and distinctive experience of recent civil conflict limit the extent to which its trajectory can be generalized to other South Asian cases.

Discussion and Analysis

Four Causal Mechanisms across Cases

Notwithstanding cross-national differences, four key mechanisms systematically link populism to democratic backsliding or decline across South Asia. The first mechanism is judicial capture whereby populist executives appoint loyal judges, engage in court-packing strategies or otherwise undermine judicial independence. Resultantly courts increasingly function as instruments of executive power rather than as effective checks on it. This pattern is strongest in India and Bangladesh, partial in Pakistan and extreme in Sri Lanka prior to regime collapse. The second mechanism is media intimidation as populist leaders seek to control the information by targeting critical media outlets through tax audits, withdrawal of advertising revenue and police raids while promoting state-friendly media and communicating directly with supporters, followers through social media platforms. These pressures encourage widespread self-censorship among journalists, and such pattern is most pronounced in Bangladesh, strong in India, moderate in Pakistan and particularly severe in Sri Lanka. The third mechanism is electoral manipulation whereby populist incumbents tilt the electoral playing field through biased or partisan election administration, opposition disqualification, constituency gerrymandering or manipulation and misuse of state resources. As a result, elections remain formally competitive but are substantively unfair. This pattern is strongest in Bangladesh, strong in India, moderate in Pakistan and present in Sri Lanka prior to regime collapse while the fourth mechanism is majoritarian exclusion as populists mobilize ethnic or religious majorities against minority communities portraying minority rights as forms of elite favoritism or as threats to the nation. Under these circumstances violence against minorities is often ignored, inadequately prosecuted or tactically encouraged and such dynamic is most pronounced in India, strong in Sri Lanka, present in Bangladesh while relatively weaker in

Pakistan where great ethnic diversity complicates the construction of a single majoritarian identity.

Why "Shift from Democracy to Populism" Is Misleading

The phrase ‘shift from democracy to populism’ implies three propositions that are analytically misleading. First, it assumes South Asia was previously democratic while this assumption is historically inaccurate. Prior to the rise of contemporary populism South Asia was already associated with patronage politics or clientelism, dynastic politics, recurrent military interventions as well as weak institutional impediments. Most regimes in the region were better referred to as ‘flawed democracies’ in the terminology of the Economist Intelligence Unit or as electoral democracies with significant liberal deficits. There was no liberal democratic golden age from which the region subsequently shifted. Second, it suggests that populism replaced democracy, but it did not as democracy has not disappeared from South Asia i.e. elections continue often with high voter turnout, political parties remain active and courts continue to perform routine or day-to-day judicial functions. What has changed is the democratic quality as liberal safeguards including civil liberties, institutional checks and balances and political pluralism have been eroded over time. Populism has therefore not replaced democracy but transformed it into a less liberal and more majoritarian form. Third, it presumes the shift is directional and irreversible, but it is not as in some cases such as Sri Lanka large-scale mobilization during the Aragalaya movement triggered the removal of a populist government and a partial restoration of parliamentary checks. Elsewhere such as Nepal populist consolidation has been largely absent with institutional arrangements limiting its emergence. These cases illustrate that robustness of democracy remains possible and that trajectories of democratic change are contingent rather than linear.

An Alternative Framing: From Flawed Democracy to Illiberal Democracy

This article puts forward an alternative framework, i.e. South Asia is not shifting from democracy to populism but from flawed democracy to illiberal democracy with populism operating as the dominant political logic.

Flawed democracy (EIU term): refers to a system in which elections are generally free but not fair completely, civil liberties are present by formal means but inconsistently protected as well as checks and balances exist but remain weak and only partially effective. In the context of South Asia this characterization broadly describes the period prior to 2010.

Illiberal democracy (Zakaria term): refers to systems in which elections continue, and rights formally exist but in practice opposition is harassed, media is intimidated, courts defer to executive authority and minorities face systematic exclusion. Populist rhetoric often legitimizes these illiberal practices as expressions of ‘direct democracy’ or as forms of ‘anti-elite cleansing.’ In the South Asian context this pattern becomes increasingly visible after 2014 in India and Bangladesh, after 2018 in Pakistan and after 2019 in Sri Lanka though temporarily.

The shift matters because it hints at a fundamentally different policy response. If populism is treated as root cause of democratic decline, then the logical response is to defeat or remove populist leaders. Nonetheless if democratic deficits generate populism and populism in turn deepens those deficits then the justified response is to address deep-seated structural problems

i.e. corruption, lack of political responsiveness, inequality and institutional weakness. Within this framework the removal of individual populist leaders such as Imran Khan or Gotabaya Rajapaksa does not in itself restore democracy, but it may instead create space for renewed populist mobilization or military intervention in some cases.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Summary of Arguments

This article has explored the purported shift from democracy to populism in South Asia and made three core arguments. First, the conventional shift narrative is misleading as South Asia was never thoroughly liberal democratic, and the region is not experiencing the replacement of democracy but a transformation from flawed democracy to illiberal democracy. Second, populism functions concurrently as both symptoms and causes i.e. democratic deficiencies generate demand for populist leaders who in turn deepen those deficits through judicial capture, media intimidation, electoral manipulation and majoritarian exclusion. Third, the trajectory is neither inevitable nor irreversible as Nepal registered modest democratic improvement, citizens of Sri Lanka overthrew a populist regime through mass mobilization and civil society actors across the region continue to resist democratic erosion.

Recommendations

For policymakers and civil society organizations seeking to arrest democratic decline five recommendations emerge from this analysis:

- Electoral Commissions should be insulated from executive pressure through security of tenure, transparent appointment processes and parliamentary oversight. The Election Commission of Nepal remains relatively independent while India's experience demonstrates the democratic risks of institutional politicization.
- Judicial autonomy should be strengthened through constitutional protections for judicial term of office, transparent appointment committees including opposition and civil society representatives and institutional mechanisms of parliament to maintain effective checks on executive power.
- Media pluralism should be preserved or protected through a combination of legal, financial and institutional safeguards. Anti-SLAPP laws (protecting journalists from strategic lawsuits) can shield journalists from frivolous litigation designed to silence criticism while public funding for community media and international support for independent fact-checking organizations can help counter populist efforts to control the information environment.
- Minority rights should be reinforced through institutional procedures that ensure substantial participatory governance. Reserved representation for historically marginalized groups or minority groups such as parliamentary seats for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in India can help reduce majoritarian-based exclusion. In a broader sense federal arrangements and power-sharing institutions can provide minority communities with increased say in politics as well as greater political protection thereby mitigating the exclusionary tendencies often associated with illiberal democracy.

- Addressing core democratic deficits is essential to reducing the demand for populism. This includes the reinforcement of genuinely independent anti-corruption agencies, ensuring openness or transparency in campaign finance, adopting proportional representation electoral systems and deepening devolution through empowered local governance structures. Such reforms improve the functioning of flawed democracies and reduce the incentives for populist mobilization by making existing institutions more responsive, inclusive and effective.

Closing Reflection

Political future of South Asia is not predetermined. The region has experienced military coups (including 1999 Pakistani coup d'état, the 2007 Bangladeshi military-backed caretaker government and earlier episodes of military intervention in Sri Lanka 1962), civil wars in Nepal and Sri Lanka and instances of severe economic and political crisis including Sri Lanka's 2022 collapse. At the same time the region has also demonstrated resilience of democracy as seen in India's post-independence democratic continuity until recent erosion, post-2006 democratic recovery of Nepal and Sri Lanka's post-2022 political reconfiguration or restructuring following mass protest. The current populist wave may therefore diminish as political waves often do but underlying structural or institutional deficits including corruption, inequality and weak institutional responsiveness will prevail unless substantively addressed. Whether South Asia moves from illiberal democracy back toward flawed democracy, advances towards liberal democracy or deteriorates further into authoritarianism will depend on choices made by citizens, civil society and political leaders. This article argues that the notion of a 'shift from democracy to populism' is analytically misleading. The more accurate characterization is a transformation from one form of flawed democracy to another with populism functioning as the dominant mediating logic. The central task for South Asian democrats therefore is to steer and guide this trajectory toward a more liberal, inclusive and accountable democratic order.

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