

izing a Democratic Pacific Union. The new DPU will be an international NGO committed to enhancing greater cooperation among Pacific democracies in the areas of governance, human security, economic prosperity and ocean development. Taiwan is willing to share our experiences and to work together with all peace-loving democracies in the Pacific to promote the birth of the democratic Pacific era!

Think of it: Which country is like Taiwan that continues to exist and develop, not faltering in the face of 50 years of China's powerful military threats? Without Taiwan, communism might have prevailed in East Asia. Without Taiwan, communism have swept throughout Central America and the Caribbean. Democracy can come into full bloom in the backyard of the United States because those countries choose to be on the side

of Taiwan rather than China. Without Taiwan serving as an "unsinkable aircraft carrier" in old Cold-War years, we cannot imagine what the world would look like today. We need the whole world to show concern for Taiwan, and we are more than willing to work with other countries on the sacred mission of safeguarding democracy, peace and prosperity.

democracy is more than casting votes

prof. bhaskara rao discusses the new wave of democracy in india, sri lanka and nepal



Democracy in South Asia is constantly evolving. In 2004, the key trends include a churning of political processes; realignments among political parties; and a revitalisation of democratic processes at the grassroots. With three major countries of the region (India, Sri Lanka and Nepal) gearing up for general elections in 2004, the region is witnessing a consolidation in democratic processes.

In fact, 2004 will witness a new wave of democracy in the region. Today, free speech, free press and freedom of association are a given in the democratic countries in South Asia. The focus now is on accountability, transparency, responsiveness and performance of governments.

More people, who were hitherto marginalised and could not access the benefits of democratic processes, are now being swept up in this wave. The frustration of people who have suffered due to prevalent inequalities in society in these countries is the driving force. Devolution of power to local communities and improved electoral practices are at the heart of the democratic processes taking place.

Single party dominance in these countries is now a thing of the past. As parties are forced to strike alliances due to fragmented electoral results, political ideologies have been marginalized. Although the Left/Right orientation of political parties has lost its significance, a new development is seen in the revival of parties with "right of centre" leanings.

Participatory democracy – best bet for equitable development

The gap between people's expectations and performance of governments/political parties has been a source of frustration. This has made the governments of the region less secure and the polity less stable. Increasingly, political parties are waking up to the fact that development is the only guarantee for a government's longevity. There is also a growing realisation that development is the best bet for democracy and vice-versa. This outlook is driving democratic processes today. The realisation that development hinges on 'good governance', which in turn is possible with a more active elec-

torate and devolution of power, has made the democratic process more dynamic.

In the initial years of independence, political parties in these countries were driven more by ideologies of one kind or other. During the next phase of democracy, these countries witnessed the emergence of personality-based politics. But in the new millennium, the concepts of 'good governance' and 'government at the doorstep' have taken root. As a result, in the initial years, the emphasis was on two political parties; in the next phase there was a proliferation of political parties.

The current phase is marked by political alliances. These changes have also unleashed new social forces: the active participation of hitherto deprived classes/communities within each country has had an impact on the democratic processes in these countries. That's why I say democracy is no longer just a question of exercising one's franchise.

Democracy is much more than elections

Interestingly, whenever there has been a constitutional breakdown because of civic disorder or differences in power sharing arrangements, the country has gone in for general elections or a national referendum. Whether it is Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan or even Sri Lanka, this has been the trend across the region.

In fact, going by the number of general elections in Pakistan and Bangladesh, it should be deduced

that these two countries are more democratic than the others. But the reality is that, both Pakistan and Bangladesh have had long spells of military rule. Bangladesh has spent 17 out of its 33 years as an independent country under military dictatorship. Pakistan has been governed by the military for 30 out of its 56 years as an independent nation. A new constitution had to be framed as often to end the stalemate with the holding of general elections. Pakistan had five general elections to legitimise the Government and as often the elected body was dismissed or dissolved.

If the number of (registered) parties that participated in the general elections were an indication of functional democracy, then Pakistan and Bangladesh would be considered to be more democratic than India or Sri Lanka. Pakistan and Bangladesh have had 5 elections compared to 13 in India and Sri Lanka during the same period. Whereas India and Sri Lanka held their first general elections in 1952, elections were held in Pakistan and Bangladesh 18 years later in 1970. Nepal's first went to the polls in 1959.

By and large, the contest in these elections has been between two leading political parties, and the margin of victory has been on the decline over the years and in some cases we have also seen hung parliaments. Despite this, the number of political parties has not declined. Rather, the number has increased. As aspirations of hitherto disadvantaged communities or regions are voiced through new political parties, they stake their claim to power by contesting elections. The rise of new political parties has therefore led to a decline in the fortunes of the older national parties. Not surprisingly, we see the emergence of "rainbow coalitions" – forged among political parties of all hues and ideologies.

While there has been a decline in electoral support for "leftist" parties, "rightist" elements are re-emerging. In India, for instance, the secular argument is yielding to a Hindutva outlook. A decade ago, no leader would have propagated a nuclear policy. But today the President of the country is an advocate of India's nuclear policy. On the one hand, fundamental elements are being revived and are coming together under a political banner and on the other – the extreme Left elements

are adopting undemocratic practices by taking the path of violence, such as the Naxalite movements in the southern states of India.

Today, irrespective of the political regime, the concern is to make elections fair and free. Efforts are being made in all the countries to make the electoral process independent of the government and improve the very quality of the procedures. Observers are being invited from other countries and the electoral process is being opened for scrutiny. Independent "audits" by "Election Watch" groups are increasingly becoming an important part of the electoral process. The processes of voter enumeration and registration are being streamlined. Elaborate efforts are being made to enroll new voters well before the elections and also to mobilise them to vote on the polling day. This activity has gained momentum in the light of the coming elections in 2004.

To give just one example, in the state of Andhra Pradesh in India, nearly 10 million names were removed from the electoral rolls last month, for various defects. The Election Commission in Pakistan in February 2004 called for separate rolls for Muslim voters with a declaration about the religious identity of voters, after having given up the practice in 2002.

Political parties and public participation

Fifty years of election-centric democracy in the region has led to the realisation that casting votes is not sufficient to consolidate and sustain democracy. Nevertheless, participation in the electoral process is important. But that alone has not helped in fulfilling the aspirations of people. The increasing gap between the promises of legitimately elected governments and their performance has led to disenchantment among sections of the electorate. The low voter turnout in many of the South Asian countries is an indication of this discontent. Voter turnout in India, for example, has barely crossed 60 per cent though 13 general elections have been held in the country. While the turnout among female voters has gone up from 46 percent to 55.6 percent, it has not gone beyond 64 percent in the case of male voters. Even in Sri Lanka the voter turnout has not exceeded 75 per cent de-

spite 13 general elections. The number of regional and local political parties has been on the rise in the countries of the region.

The demographic profile of voters has also undergone a change in recent times and this shift is driving politics in the region. With 60 per cent of voters belonging to the under-30-years age group, as in India, the chances of younger people getting elected have also improved. New political candidates have a better chance of entering the polity, whereas the fortunes of older candidates and parties have declined. The general elections in 2004 will see the emergence of new leadership across all political parties.

Participation of women - long way to go

Woman power has come to the fore in the countries of South Asia. In Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and India women have been elected to the top job more than once. Even in Nepal a woman (Sheilaja Acharya) emerged as one of the leading candidates in the race for Prime Ministership in 1996. Bangladesh has witnessed two major women leaders fighting out the election battle. Pakistan has elected a lady to head the country twice. Six key states in India today have women as their chief ministers.

The issue of one-third reservation of seats for women in the national parliament and state legislatures has been widely debated within and outside the Parliament in India. 60 seats in Pakistan Assembly are already reserved (out of 350) for women. Women voters constitute 45-50 per cent of the population, and yet there are less than 10 per cent women among political representatives. This is true of women's participation in government administration, judiciary as well as the mass media.

Though women's participation in all sections of society still has a long way to go, it is growing. Activities focusing on women-centric development programmes, including self-help and micro-credit groups (such as Grameen Bank in Bangladesh and DWACRA in India) are bound to result in an increasing participation of women in democratic processes as well as in governance. Their participation would ensure that democracy gets more broadbased.

This is already evident today in

India following the Constitutional Amendment of 1993, which has made devolution of power to Panchayats and Municipalities compulsory. The amendment also makes it mandatory for these bodies to hold periodic elections and reserve one-third of elected posts for women.

As a result, today nearly a million women hold elected positions in Panchayats and Municipalities and nearly one-fifth of them head the elected body. Most importantly, most of these women are from backward communities. Their participation in local governance is helping to expand the very scope and meaning of democracy.

Media, the mediator?

If elections are meant democracy-at-work, mass media has been at its

are preoccupied predominantly with news about political parties and electoral politics. In India as high as one-third of editorial space is devoted exclusively to party politics. While television has emerged as an entertainment medium, it is increasingly becoming a prime source for news and current affairs, just as the radio and the print medium.

The proliferation of mass media in these countries has ensured that the opinion-makers constitute a significant and important section of society. Given the strength of mass media, it should follow that people are actively involved in the electoral process. However, there is no evidence of that especially in terms of voter turnout.

Public opinion counts and matters a lot more today - not just at the time of elections - but in the day to day

of mass media, particularly television, the significance of such public opinion surveys will only increase in the coming years.

Electoral Reforms

Electoral reform is a key initiative in the process of sustaining and consolidating democratic processes. Poll reforms are aimed at making the elected Government more accountable, making the process of election more transparent, free, fair and independent with codes of conduct for parties and the incumbent Government. State funding of party campaigns is another key issue. That a large number of criminals and people with dubious backgrounds are getting elected to the Parliament and State Assemblies - some are getting elected with much less than 40 per cent of polled votes - is also a cause for concern. Election campaigns are also getting vitiated due to "money, muscle and media power". Based on civil society initiatives, the Supreme Court of India has declared that all candidates for an election should disclose by an affidavit details about their educational and criminal background as well as assets. It is widely believed that this condition has discouraged many criminals from contesting the recently held elections in the four state assemblies in India. Several such proposals are being considered to make the electoral process transparent. With the adoption of Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) countrywide in 2004, the scope for malpractices will come down further and increase the efficiency in conducting the elections. The judiciary in India is also playing a key role in institutionalising democratic practices and nurturing the democratic spirit.

In India, some years ago there was a debate about the presidential form of Government. Interestingly, the campaign for the 2004 national elections in India is being held in the manner and style of a presidential election. Sri Lanka changed several years ago to the proportional representation system from that of a first-past-the-post (FPP) system which is what India and other countries continue to follow. Some parties in India have mooted the idea of adopting proportional representation system for women voters (as in Pakistan).

A code of conduct for parties prior to and during the elections is widely accepted in India. The Elec-



best in upholding democratic process. Parliament and media are two sides of the same coin of democracy. Free elections alone are not enough for sustaining democracy. A free-press is as important and indispensable for the very relevance of Parliamentary system. The two are complementary. They sustain and mutually reinforce each other. If media is Fourth-Estate, Parliament is the pillar of the (e)state.

Another key player in most democracies is the mass media. Mass media in the countries of the region have been growing by leaps and bounds. With the use of cable and satellite technology, the mass media has achieved a major breakthrough in expanding reach. Despite these advances, all mass media (newspapers, radio, television, cinema) put together reaches only half of the population in Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and two-thirds people in India. Due to a higher literacy rate in Nepal, mass media has a higher reach.

Most newspapers in the region

functioning of the government as well as in policy making. With the spread of new communication technologies - such as the Internet, SMS, cellular phones, satellite TV and online activism of individual citizens - the democratic ethos is spreading, thus enhancing the very scope of democracy.

Expanding telecom networks and higher usage and ownership of computers is further enabling this process. The spread of e-governance is bound to have major implications on the functioning of democratic institutions.

So though elections may come once in five years, government performance is being monitored, tracked and evaluated on a regular basis. Public opinion surveys have now become a tool for democracy-at-work. Public opinion is thus a means to enhance and sustain democracy. Poll-eve opinion surveys are today a part of the electoral process and accepted as a democratic practice. With the steady decline in ideology-based party system and the spread

tion Commission (EC) in India has been asserting its independent authority – granted by the Constitution – to ensure that elections are free and fair even if it amounts to going against the government. The EC's initiatives have been much appreciated by citizens and today the Indian Election Commission is looked upon as a model by other countries.

Though democratic traditions are getting consolidated, there is a lack of inner-party democracy among political parties themselves, both in terms of decision-making as well as in the election of their own leaders. Parties have become more and more personality-centred to the extent of promoting a personality cult. Such a tendency is likely to change in the coming years with the demographic shift in the electorate, increase in educational levels and use of new communication technologies.

Political parties continue to be channels for legitimate government formation in the democratic set up though there has been a transformation in the nature of these political parties. A new wave of democratisation is being witnessed in South Asia as parties recognise that good governance and development go hand in hand. The trend towards partici-

patory development is also paving the way for transparency and better standards in the practice and functioning of democratic institutions. Electoral reforms are being initiated in an endeavour to make elections more representative, fair and free with better standards and protocols for political parties and election campaigns.



the fox that guards the henhouse

the role of political parties in russia, by **alexander shishlov**, member of the federal bureau of yabloko

The prospects for democratic consolidation within the Russian Federation must be considered against a backdrop of decades of one party rule in the USSR. The only political party that existed in the USSR, until the 1980s, was the CPSU and this party was part of the totalitarian state machinery, its governing role established by the constitution.

In the perestroika period of the late 80s, many political clubs, movements, people's fronts and other non-formal organizations emerged, and some of them transformed into political parties. The first alternative party to be officially recognized by Soviet Authorities was the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, headed by well-known extremist Mr. Zhirinovskiy. This party had little to do with liberalism, however, as it was said to be a project sponsored by the KGB.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, hundreds of political NGOs, labelled political parties, emerged and covered the breadth of the political landscape, from extreme right to extreme left. But there was no specific legal framework for their activities, there was only the law

on civic organisations and political parties did not enjoy any privileges or responsibilities in comparison with other types of NGOs.

Despite the proliferation of parties, little progress has been made as political parties have been organizationally very weak and the structure of the party list has been very unstable and changes a lot from one campaign to another. This has made it difficult for parties to take advantage of the electoral law requiring 50% of the seats in the State Duma be distributed following the result of the party list voting. Additionally, there is widespread scepticism among the people concerning participation in party activities. This is probably a natural reaction to 70 years of one party rule.

Legal Standing of Political Parties

Legally, little has been done to protect the role of political parties and expand their influence. In July 2001 the Law on Political Parties was passed and it did significantly enlarge the role played by political parties in the electoral system by sim-

plifying candidate nomination by parties at all levels of government and by requiring that half of the seats in regional legislatures be determined by party-list voting, as in the State Duma. However, it also required parties to have 10,000 members in order to register and function legally and a party must have no fewer than 100 members in a majority of the country's 89 regions. The law grants political parties a partial monopoly on running candidates for legislative office, but creates serious obstacles for the registration of new political parties and gives the executive branch and Procuracy broad powers to regulate, investigate and close down parties.

This law, in conjunction with the December 2002 Law on Elections of State Duma Deputies, expands campaign spending limits and public financing of political parties, shortens the official campaign period, limits the conditions under which candidates can be removed from the ballot and imposes restrictions on media coverage. Parties who participate in general elections and win more than 2% of the votes are granted some funds from the federal budget,