

# **International Conference on Dynamics of Political Change in India's Neighbourhood**

In the recent past, many South Asian states have been experiencing a movement towards democracy. Pakistan now has an elected government. The current government in Bangladesh came into power with massive electoral majority. Bhutan took cautious steps towards democracy by conducting its first general elections in 2008. Maldives witnessed its first general elections after thirty years in 2008. Nepal has moved from monarchial form of governance to a government based on competitive electoral processes. Myanmar has recently conducted elections. Sri Lanka seems to be transiting towards post-civil war political processes. Afghanistan is struggling to establish stable and well-accepted political processes. And there are reports that in China, a neighbour of many South Asian countries, the votaries for democracy are increasingly becoming vocal.

All the above mentioned countries are facing myriad challenges. In some, the armed forces are always lurking in the background with military take-overs always appearing imminent. In some, the failure to have agreed constitutional framework may spoil the gains made in the recent past. In others there are apprehensions that the old regime is actually giving little space for the emergence and strengthening of new political forces. Given these multiple trajectories, the following aspects pertaining to countries in India's neighbourhood need greater reflection:

- In trying to understand the dynamics of political changes it is important to move beyond the role of individuals and focus on structural dynamics that facilitate political change. There is a need to map the economic and social changes that are propelling the new dynamics in the political process. Did the evolving economic processes alter the power relations between various social groups? Did the countries in India's neighborhood witness the emergence of new groups due to the changes in the economic realm? It is such questions and many more, which require considerable deliberation.
- It is important to understand the role of institutions in facilitating change in internal politics of various countries in India's neighborhood. In countries such as Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, China, and Myanmar, the Army has been playing a significant role in the decision-making processes with varying degrees of intensity. Given the army's predominant role in some of these countries, it is important to examine the role of the Army in engendering and in restraining the emergence of new political forces. The transformations that the military as an institution undergoes during the process of transition also need to be mapped.
- Political parties are important vehicles for interest aggregation/articulation in any democracy. Political parties can work as vehicles of change and act as engines that absorb pressures that are generated when countries are experiencing rapid political changes. Political parties can also indulge in actions that tend to exacerbate divides in the society. The forces of change that are impacting the functioning of political parties and the strategies, which are being deployed by the political parties need careful interrogation.
- Political culture in a country is contingent on numerous factors. Different political institutions foster different kinds of political culture, which tend to acquire life of their own even after the disappearance of the political institutions. Often political culture in a country is also moulded by

historical, cultural and religious factors. Given the predominant role of the political culture in guiding the response of individuals to changing political events it is important to map the nodes of congruence and divergence between decisions taken and the broader contours of the political culture. More importantly, it is also important to define and map the various factors that resulted in emergence and evolution of political culture and its impact on a country's polity.

- Apart from the State and related institutions various non-state actors are having substantial impact on the political changes that are taking place. For instance, the role of armed groups in ushering-in changes and in restricting the evolution of participatory political systems in India's neighborhood needs closer examination.
- The roles of religion and religious actors/organizations in shaping the dynamics of political change in India's neighborhood need to be explored. The following questions need further interrogation: what are the nodes of interaction between the religious actors/organizations with state institutions? How have such interactions impacted the state institutions and also the religious actors/organizations? How are religious actors/organizations constructing communities and identities and what has been the influence of such an enterprise on the movement towards participatory decision-making processes?
- The positive correlation between the density of civil society/associational life and openness of the political system has been advocated by many. From Alexis de Tocqueville to Robert Putnam numerous scholars have highlighted the significance of associational density in the functioning of a political system. The expansion/contraction and the changes in the functional domains of civil society and its resultant effect on the political process need further analysis. Lastly, the role of media (new media) cannot be underestimated in understanding the trajectory of fast paced political changes.

The conference will have presentation by academicians, policy makers, and media persons among others on the above mentioned themes with reference to countries in India's Neighbourhood.

**Date** : 09-10 March 2011

**Venue Sector** : Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIAS), IB Block, Plot No. 166 III, Salt Lake. Kolkata – 7000106.