



# Democracy in Motion



GATEWAY HOUSE

INDIAN COUNCIL ON GLOBAL RELATIONS

भारतीय वैश्विक संबंध परिषद्

# Democracy in Motion

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# Preface

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In the global discourse today, democracy is viewed as a static goal – rebel for freedom, hold an election and a country automatically becomes a democracy. That the lorry of democracy actually begins to trundle and sway on pot-holed roads only after holding an election, is lost on the vast masses of protestors and leaders who dream of instant liberty and enlightened governance.

This view of instant democracy is not new; it has been held dear for decades in the past and current century. As we know from the Indian experience, the process of ensuring democracy is long and arduous – and these days it is acutely so. The neglect of our tribal communities, dynastic rule, corruption, displacement, joblessness – these have created disillusionment and cynicism about the democratic process.

But perhaps we are expecting too much from our democracy. Far from being an apotheosis, we are a democracy still in stream.

India is paradigmatic of democracy in motion; it embodies its every nuance, and many of its aberrations. Its practice has an impact on its neighbours. For instance, dynastic rule and money power in India have not only heightened the barriers for ordinary citizens to enter politics decently, it has also legitimised the same influence across South Asia. Only in Myanmar has it taken a political dynasty to remove the impediments to self-determination. The lesson: it is not enough to be an electoral democracy, it is essential to also be an effective and equitable democracy.

Some of this equity is easily achievable, as the essays within point out. Groups of tribal women in Odisha have used economic empowerment to enter local politics and enhance governance. In Mumbai, citizens working with the municipal corporation may slowly be transforming their city by first changing their locality. And to be sustainable, democracy must be enjoined with enterprise. Small entrepreneurs across India are innovating and working to create their own livelihoods— in the process democratising enterprise and income-generation.

On August 15 this year, India will turn 65, a senior democratic citizen. But we are still adolescent and unsteady in our systems. The only way to stabilise the constant swaying motion of our democracy is to engage in healthy and robust debate about its practice, principles and promise. This is Gateway House's contribution to that discourse.

**MANJEET KRIPALANI**  
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# Regenerating our democracy

*The promise of an egalitarian democratic system in India, and across the world, has been tarnished by the entrenchment of dynastic leadership and by an inordinate concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a few. It is imperative that we find ways to confront the shortcomings that have crept into our cherished democracy*

NEELAM DEO

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On August 15, 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, addressed a newly-liberated people suffused with a sense of possibility and hope to collectively build an egalitarian and democratic nation. The people's aspirations were articulated in Nehru's famous words:

*"The future beckons to us. Whither do we go and what shall be our endeavour? To bring freedom and opportunity to the common man, to the peasants and workers of India; to fight and end poverty and ignorance and disease; to build up a prosperous, democratic and progressive nation, and to create social, economic and political institutions which will ensure justice and fullness of life to every man and woman."*

This vision was subsequently enshrined in our Constitution on January 26, 1950.

Sixty five years later, the dream of a truly democratic India has dulled more than a little. Hope has been replaced by dismay at the tawdry pursuit of self-interest that pervades our present political and economic landscape.

Did we expect too much from a post-colonial, impoverished country? Did we overstate our future and now find that the reality does not match our definition? Did we unrealistically compare ourselves with other fledgling or developing nations? In other words, is the sense of disillusionment only a problem of perception?

After all, a lot has been achieved since 1947 in taking a population that has nearly quadrupled to 1.2 billion towards a more dignified standard of living. Life expectancy has nearly tripled to 72 years, while infant mortality has halved. Literacy has grown from 12% to 74%; unemployment has dropped from 48% at independence to around 19%, and per capita income has risen from subsistence to approximately US \$ 3500 at Purchasing Power Parity levels. [i]

Development indicators, however, are debatable and only one part of the picture. The sense of failed expectations is not only a matter of perception, it is embedded in more tangible experiences. The promise of an egalitarian democratic nation has been tarnished by the entrenchment of dynastic leadership, by an inordinate concentration of power and wealth in the hands of fewer and fewer interconnected politicians,

bureaucrats and businessmen. This new aristocracy has replaced the colonial rulers and kings of earlier times and effectively subverted the ideals of a true people's democracy. Indians are uneasy because they no longer feel empowered to determine their destiny.

At the same time, a parallel, paradoxical process is underway. The Indian citizen has greater expectations and a sense of entitlement. The spurt of economic growth since India began a process of economic liberalisation in the early 1990s, has raised aspirations. The escalating trend of populist political campaigning during elections involves promises made to potential vote banks—promises that people expect will be fulfilled, but rarely are.

This combination of greater expectations, along with a recognition that access to economic and political influence is increasingly circumscribed in Indian democracy, has resulted in disillusionment and cynicism. After 2007, as economic growth began to slow and the inequality of incomes became more palpable, Indians began to attribute this failure of equitable development to the degeneration of political parties into family fiefdoms. A nexus between politicians, bureaucrats and business has been gobbling up the "commons" or community resources such as land and water—this is also exemplified by the many scams in the telecom and mining sectors.

The creation of pockets of wealth has taken the number of dollar billionaires in India from zero in 2000 to 48 in 2012, while the number of malnourished children persists at 42%. [ii] Equally, people recognise that decision-making and governance, instead of becoming more decentralised, have become further concentrated in a few powerful hands. There is also a growing awareness that India's fiscal and financial policy is losing coherence, and that it is manipulated by big business at the cost of the majority of the people.

The situation is exacerbated by the absence of any coherent political ideology. Governing coalitions are formed only on the mathematics of parliamentary majorities. The growing power of regional political parties, necessary for the formation of a federal government, has not led to greater devolution of power; it has only resulted in ever-greater giveaways to garner the numbers required to achieve office or pass legislation.

These downsides of electoral democracy are echoed across South Asia. All our neighbours—at various stages of democratisation—are confronting an entrenchment of political dynasties and a consequent increase in inequality. Indeed this malaise of our times is not restricted to any region—it is global. It is especially tragic because democracy evolved to control the arbitrary use of the inherited power of kings—and political dynasties are setting back this hard-earned progress.

In Pakistan, the army, judiciary and the elected Asif Ali Zardari government are caught in an absurd confrontation; the Supreme Court forced out the prime minister, Yousuf Raza Gilani, and now threatens his successor with the same, because he refused to request Swiss authorities to reopen corruption cases against Zardari. In the guise of tackling corruption, a slow judicial coup is undercutting the democratically-elected government. Meanwhile, as a long-term precaution against being obliterated, the Bhutto dynasty has handed over the leadership of the Pakistan People's Party to Benazir's son, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari.

In Bangladesh, the Sheikh Hasina government has tried to recover the secular integrity of its independence struggle by putting on trial the people involved in the genocide committed during that struggle and the subsequent murder of her father, Sheikh Mujib. But former President Khaleda Zia, who was married to another former president and a hero of the independence struggle, leads a political opposition that has subverted the functioning of Parliament. Both her sons are charged with massive corruption. While the two Begums engage in battle, law and order have almost vanished from the streets, and the number of millionaires using the corrupt system to make money, is growing.

Further south in Sri Lanka, the Rajapaksa dynasty succeeded the Bandarnaike dynasty. Three years after eliminating the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the Rajapaksa family is busy consolidating its hold over the nation. Three of the President's brothers are ministers in the government and the sons and nephews of the family are in Parliament. But the Tamils—victims of untold violence committed by both the Sri Lankan army and the LTTE—have not been rehabilitated, and power has not devolved to the predominantly Tamil north eastern provinces, as promised by the State.

Up north, in Nepal, people suffered terrible violence through a decade of civil war to oust a decadent monarchy, only to be cheated by their elected representatives. Despite numerous extensions in the last three years, the Parliament, which doubles as a Constituent Assembly, has failed to deliver a Constitution. Meanwhile, several political leaders, including leaders of the dominant communist party, are busy buying choice real estate in Kathmandu.

While the process of democracy is being debased by older practitioners across South Asia, another process is emerging—newly-risen nations in the Arab world are taking their first tentative steps towards genuine elected representative government. In Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, after decades of rule by dictators grooming their sons as successors, the people now hope to recover their voice and their share of jobs and the wealth of their nations, in a more transparent economy.

Is there a model that the emerging democracies can look towards? The Arabs have pulled down dynasties at a time when Indian and other South Asian democracies are consolidating dynastic rule. Neither the US, mired in a political deadlock and economic misery, nor Europe, trapped in the woes of the Euro, can be the guiding lights for negotiating the principles of participatory and egalitarian democracy. Could the economically successful but authoritarian Beijing model be an alternative?

For pluralistic countries such as India, the answer is a resounding no. This makes it imperative for us to find ways to confront the shortcomings that have crept into our cherished democracy. Indians must not allow their democratic institutions, such as the Parliament, to be manipulated for the entrenchment of privilege. We, as Indian citizens, can do this by participating more actively in politics, refusing to be part of a culture of bribery, and speaking out in various public fora at every opportunity. We must also actively rebuild and nurture our educational and intellectual institutions so that they act as robust and legitimate alternatives to the existing systems. We need and must strive for a moral regeneration, only then will other countries find something worthwhile to emulate in our experience of democracy.

[i] World Bank figures

[ii] Malnutrition statistic from the International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington, D.C.

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# Democracy and enterprise

*If we support the creation and consolidation of small enterprises, the resultant growth in employment and incomes will further India's development. This will increase the vibrancy and sustainability of our democracy*

KISHORE BIYANI

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Democracy and entrepreneurship are both dimensions of personal freedom. Democracy requires freedom of expression, a free press, and a respect for human rights. A strong foundation for enterprise in a society allows all citizens to pursue their preferred livelihoods, benefit from choice, and provides an opportunity to generate wealth and improve standards of living. In a functioning democracy, citizens have equal opportunities to pursue their ideas, passion and vision through the growth of enterprise and create livelihoods for themselves and others. This makes them active participants and beneficiaries in the economic growth and development of their country and the world.

Both democracy and enterprise have a rich history in India. In the 6th century BCE, the citizens of Vaishali, the capital of the republican Licchavi state, now in Bihar, were amongst the world's first practitioners of democracy. Contemporary India's tryst with democracy is unparalleled in the world in terms of its sheer human scale, political context and geographical location. Similarly, for centuries, the Indian subcontinent has been a hub of global trade and commerce. In more contemporary times, there is hardly any part of the world where Indian entrepreneurs have not made their mark. India's entrepreneurial class is regarded as one of the country's key strengths when compared with other emerging economies.

However, four decades of socialism in post Independence India, is-incentivised entrepreneurship. Although the state directly intervened only in some selected sectors of the economy, the license raj ("rule" of a complex system of permits and licences), made it extremely difficult for new entrepreneurs to scale up their businesses. Economic liberalisation in India since the early 1990s has removed some of those barriers and opened up opportunities. Globalisation, or global interconnectedness, propelled in part by major advances in technology, has further helped our entrepreneurs. The fast-growing enterprises and businesses of the two decades of liberalisation ensured that India's emerging cadre of young graduates found productive employment within the country.

We have progressed significantly in opening up the economy; but economic liberalisation has so far benefited big businesses more than small entrepreneurs. The foot soldiers of capitalism still have to fight an everyday battle against the bureaucracy, antiquated laws, regulations and restrictions in raising capital to grow their business.

The biggest impact of socialism has been more insidious—it has affected the Indian psyche. The bedrock of enterprise is the ability to take risk. Failure is an inevitable stop in the journey of every successful entrepreneur. But Indians tend to deride risk and ridicule failure. The fear of failure is so ingrained in the Indian mind that even after experiencing some success, entrepreneurs are afraid of taking their business to the next level of scale and growth. Even after 20 years of liberalisation, few local businesses transform into regional powerhouses, and rarely does a regional brand grow to become a national player. During my travels across small-town India, I have met superb entrepreneurs, and encountered exciting ideas and promising brands. But only a handful of national brands or companies are based in these numerous towns, away from the few large metropolises of the country.

India will undergo the next and necessary phase of growth and development only when small enterprises start building national scale. Our economy is driven by domestic consumption and the burgeoning Indian middle class is increasingly demanding value-added products and services such as food and agri-products, textile, furniture and household goods. This demand is a unique opportunity for new enterprises to grow and prosper. A shift from commodity-led consumption to value-added consumption can create jobs for millions for Indians, generating income and creating wealth for those involved in this transformation. This will strengthen a virtuous cycle of consumption and development.

For such a cycle to be set in self-propelling motion, we must support the creation and consolidation of small enterprises, and change attitudes by encouraging risk-taking behaviour and being realistic about failure. Public policy should be shaped to enable small



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enterprises to create jobs, raise capital and cut through the red tape and bureaucracy that still surround the day-to-day operations of small businesses. At the same time, big businesses and India's business leaders must play a larger role in mentoring domestic enterprise.

It is a well-established fact that small businesses create more jobs than big businesses. As the American economy emerges from the slowdown, small businesses are playing a big role in spurring economic activity. The U.S. has recently passed the Jumpstart Our Business Startups (JOBS) Act to further encourage the growth and funding of small businesses. India could take similar measures to unleash entrepreneurial energy. The resultant expansion in choices for consumers, and the growth in employment and incomes, will further India's development. This will make our democracy more vibrant and sustainable.

CH

*Kishore Biyani is the founder and Group CEO of Future Group.*

# The Sisters of Sampoorna

*The women of a federation of self-help groups in Mayurbhanj district in Odisha, contested and won elections to their village panchayats and samitis in February 2012. They now share a clear agenda of the changes they would like to bring about in their villages. This example of what can be achieved when ordinary citizens have the courage to participate in the political process, will eventually resonate throughout our country*

MEERA SANYAL

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In the summer of 2012, I took a journey through the villages of six states in India: Gujarat, Assam, Bengal, Odisha, Uttarakhand and Madhya Pradesh.

It was a fascinating sojourn, and I returned full of hope. In our villages lives a vibrant India, and one where there are many fine examples of good governance driven by strong local grassroots participation.

I saw that in places where the people took active part in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs are local governance bodies in rural India), government subsidies and schemes were more efficiently and honestly utilised. Consequently, these villages had noticeably higher development indicators.

Equally interesting, where larger numbers of women were on the panchayats, or more women were *pradhans* (heads of the village governing council), the outcomes were better. For example, in Lobsan village in Sabarkantha district in Gujarat, where the *pradhan* was Zahera Daruwalla, the village primary school was better staffed, facilities for drinking water were better, and the village was cleaner and more hygienic than the other villages I visited in the same district.

To my pleasant surprise, very few of these women were regarded in their villages as proxies for the men in their families. While many had initially stood for elections on the quota reserved for women in PRIs, I was delighted to see that many women were also confident of standing and winning on merit.

The story of the Didis or Sisters of Sampoorna, in the Mayurbhanj district of Odisha, is one such amazing example.

The Karanjia block in this district is an area that has been historically characterised by high poverty levels and mass migration to cities. The population of this area is predominantly *adivasi* (tribal)—the Santhal, Munda, Bathudi and Kolha are the major tribes here. Villages are located in the fringe and buffer areas of the forests of Simlipal, and the *adivasis* are dependant on forest products.

The women of this district are artistic. Each home is beautifully decorated in colours and designs that could grace the museums of Paris. But their days are long and hard. Every morning, they rise at 4 a.m. and go in groups to the forest to gather *sal* leaves. When the day's work is done, they sit until late at night weaving the leaves into plates and containers that are then picked up by middlemen and shipped to the temples of South India, for the distribution of *prasadam* to devotees. The selling price of these natural, eco-friendly and bio-degradable plates ranges from Rs. 60 to Rs. 100 per thousand—by any standards a pittance for the amount of effort put into making them, and indeed for their true value.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) like Pradan and foundations like the Royal Bank of Scotland Foundation (which my bank runs and of which I am the Chair) have worked successfully in Karanjia block to organise women into self-help groups (SHGs). These groups focus on economically empowering their members. They encourage savings, help in the formation of thrifts, enable micro-credit, and facilitate alternative livelihood options such as producing and packaging spices and rearing commercial poultry, so that women have access to supplementary sources of income.

In many parts of the country SHGs coalesce to form a federation that enhances the economic strength of the groups. One such, called Sampoorna, was formed in Karanjia comprising 400 SHGs and a membership of approximately 6,000 women drawn from 255 villages.

Unlike other federations, Sampoorna, guided by Sulakshana Pandit, a bright 28-year-old woman who works with Pradan, decided to focus on political empowerment rather than on economic activities.

Funded by a United Nations' programme for women's rights, Sulakshana and her team started workshops for the members of Sampoorna, to create awareness about PRIs and their role in village and district governance. In February 2012, as the *panchayat* elections approached, Sulakshana asked the Sampoorna *didis* if any of them would stand for the 125 *panchayat* ward

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seats in the Karanjia block. To her astonishment, 137 women said they would. Supported by members of their SHGs and their friends and families, the Sisters of Sampoorna formed a formidable group. Confronted by this development, the established political parties swung into action—intimidation, monetary clout, and other tactics came into the picture. The women stood their ground, the elections were keenly fought, and the outcome is a wonderful example of Democracy in Motion.

Of the 125 *panchayat* ward seats, Sampoorna candidates won 88. For the 13 posts of Gram Pradhan or Sarpanch (head of the village *panchayat*), 29 Sampoorna sisters contested and 7 were elected. For the 13 Panchayat Samiti seats (this tier is an administrative division comprising a group of villages), 33 Sampoorna candidates filed papers and 8 won, and for the Zilla Parishad (at the district level) 8 Sampoorna sisters filed nominations and 2 succeeded.

This is an impressive set of statistics. As I interacted with the *didis* of Sampoorna, I found that their spirit was even more impressive. Those who had won shared a clear and focused agenda of the changes they would like to bring about in their villages. Those who lost felt no sense of dejection—they were confident that by holding those who had won, accountable, they could also make a significant contribution to improving the quality of life in their villages.

I believe the example set by the Sisters of Sampoorna in Karanjia will, in time, resonate through our country. They have shown what can be achieved when ordinary citizens have the courage to come forward and participate in the political process. More importantly, the villagers who voted for them have shown that democracy is a gift—but only if we chose to put cynicism aside and exercise our franchise wisely.

*Meera H Sanyal is the Country Executive and Chairperson of the Royal Bank of Scotland, in India. In 2009 she stood as an Independent candidate for the Lok Sabha elections from South Mumbai. In 2011 she was the only woman leader from India to be invited by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to join her International Council on Women's Business Leadership.*

# Dynastic democracies

*Dynastic politics is as diverse as politics itself in South Asian and other countries. There may be some benefits to dynastic rule, but a political system founded on democratic principles rejects the idea of dynasty*

NANDINI DEO

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Dynastic politics has been a feature of human history ever since we established a division of labour and some people specialised in the provision of security and governance. Hunter-gatherer societies tend to be more democratic, selecting leaders based on ability rather than genealogy. But once some people develop an expertise in ruling, the question arises: to whom will they pass on their expertise?

The easiest and obvious answer tends to be—to their children. After all, the children can begin training from birth—forging personal connections with their parents' friends and supporters, absorbing the rules of politics within that society, and usually being able to access the best teachers who also serve as their parents' advisers. Inheriting the duties and rights associated with ruling normally should work better than most other means of selecting a ruler. It could even introduce a degree of stability and predictability to the matter of succession, thus reducing conflict and uncertainty as the current ruler ages.

There are major exceptions—especially when the offspring of the ruling family are incompetent or corrupt, partly as a result of their elite status. Born with a silver spoon in their mouths, they can lack resourcefulness, worldliness, and empathy.

This becomes a problem in the case of a democracy. A political system founded on democratic principles rejects the idea that a person's station in life is determined by birth. Instead, at the core of democracies is a requirement for competitive and meaningful choice in rulers, exercised by the sovereign people. In order to rule, one must appeal to the people and win their approval, rather than be the favourite son (or daughter). This mechanism keeps politicians accountable and the political system responsive to the needs of voters. Democracy would seem to be in some tension with dynastic succession. But even in such a meritocratic system, the advantages of dynastic politics can remain, especially if the society is not deeply unequal, where political power also translates into economic and religious power.

Dynastic leadership takes root in all political systems across the world. In the U.S., the multiple senators, presidents, and governors from the Bush family

exemplify the working of dynastic politics in a democracy. The personal connections and access to elite circles first developed by Prescott Bush was passed on to George Bush Sr. and then to his sons George and Jeb Bush.

In Myanmar, Aung San and his daughter Aung San Suu Kyi are an example of dynastic politics in a non-democratic context. The memory of Aung San as a freedom fighter helped sustain the legitimacy of his daughter's fight for a more democratic Myanmar, even during her long years of house arrest. On the other hand, the looming succession of power in Egypt from Hosni Mubarak to his son Gamal Mubarak was a key grievance of the revolutionaries of the Arab Awakening. These examples show that dynastic politics is as diverse as politics itself, both in terms of how people receive dynastic succession and its effects on political outcomes.

Many complexities exist within the democratic-dynastic dynamic. For example, the condemnation of dynastic politics in democracies is often a way to delegitimise female politicians. In India in particular, after the 1992 constitutional amendment reserving for women one-third of the seats in village-level panchayats and urban municipal governments, women entered local-level politics in substantial numbers. This led to a dismissive discourse about women merely working as "proxy" politicians for the men in their families. Even as far back as 1966, when Indira Gandhi was selected as the leader of the Congress party, she was derisively called a "gungi gudua"—a "dumb doll." Like many other women who enter politics through familial links, she turned out to be a strong personality with a distinct policy agenda. Now it is likely that Sonia Gandhi will hand the party over to Motilal Nehru's great-great grandson Rahul.

Dynasties have had a corrosive effect on Indian politics. The Nehru-Gandhi family is a prime example. Since Jawaharlal Nehru, Congress leaders have promoted politicians based on personal equations and loyalty rather than on the basis of ability and popularity. They have centralised decision-making within the party and made its workings undemocratic. It has proved so successful for the party that this process is now mimicked by all other parties. After initially


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bypassing dynastic politics, the Bharatiya Janata Party's leaders are now promoting their sons and nephews; the Samajwadi Party, the Shiv Sena, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), the Akali Dal have all demonstrated dynastic and undemocratic tendencies. Only the Communist

parties in India have, so far, not wholly been given over to personal and dynastic rule.

In some cases the children of politicians are indeed best trained to become the leaders of the party; today, however, they are being promoted at absurdly young ages. Dynastic politics in India has spun out of control. By eating away at democracy within political parties, it has undermined competition between political parties and given us a class of politicians both incompetent and entitled, who view political office as a means to secure ill-gotten wealth and prestige rather than as a form of public service.

The pernicious effects of India's dynastic politics have not only impacted our own national and local politics, but is also evident in neighbouring countries. The spectacle of Benazir Bhutto willing the leadership of the Pakistan People's Party to her teenaged son Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, as if it were a family possession rather than a public institution, is a stellar exemplar of dynastic arrogance in South Asia. This arrangement was accepted because in India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Pakistan, political parties are held together through kinship and personal loyalties rather than policy or ideological cohesion.

On the positive side, the legitimacy of dynastic politics has also meant that India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh have all had women in positions of great political power. This alone cannot legitimise the interconnections between politics and family in South Asia, but it can, perhaps, temper our judgement of dynastic politics. 

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# A wounded democracy

*It isn't enough to simply boast that India is the world's biggest democracy. That is today a tragic, and obsolete, conceit. There is an urgent need to break through the mall-stupor of Middle India and Policy India and continually tell this "mainstream" how poverty, corruption, displacement and denial are creating vast pools of negative energy across the country*

SUDEEP CHAKRAVARTI

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There is an urgent need to evangelise the compelling reality that there is a country at stake: India.

It is these days fashionable in certain circles to write off India's neighbours—Pakistan, Nepal—as failed states, and superciliously refer to other neighbours—Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar—as those who have seen the guiding light of India's constitutionally mandated plurality, inclusion, and democracy.

Perhaps it is because India's democracy has achieved much. The country's army has remained within parliamentary ambit. Universal suffrage—the right to vote—was accorded equally to women and men and all socio-economic classes from the moment of free India's birth. Each general election is the largest such exercise in the world. India's Constitution remains among the finest, its Parliament and state assemblies—the elections to which dwarf in numbers and logistics the national elections in several major countries—are among the most representative. Developments such as the Right to Information Act, extracted more as an imperative by concerned citizenry than delivered by dedicated legislators and administrators, is a glorious example of *vox populi*.

Even with socio-economic poverty in excess of that hoary chestnut of relativity, sub-Saharan Africa, and strangling regulation, India's economy counts among the largest and most dynamic in the world. More importantly, India is still here, still not disintegrated against all manner of odds, ranging from trying wars with Pakistan and China, to India's crushing wars with itself.

But implicit in this very resilience is the DNA of weakness. A delusion, even, that constitutional adoption of democracy and its everyday, institutional drum-beating as a broad-spectrum antibiotic, is a guard against all manner of ills.

Where India journeys from here, and how well it journeys, remains uncertain. Perhaps a more pleasant and enduring journey will be surer were India to also become a "good" democracy, an "effective" democracy, a place where people don't need to take to arms, or

be killed, tortured or implicated in imaginary crimes for asking for simple rights to identity, livelihood and dignity mandated by the country's Constitution.

It isn't enough to simply boast that India is the world's biggest democracy. That is today a tragic, and obsolete, conceit.

Whatever we like to think about the growing foreign policy prowess of India, it is—and will be—governed by India's internal health. Such health remains deeply vulnerable. And, such vulnerability derives from the ongoing concerns related to Left-wing extremism and several other forms of extremism from the religious to that based on issues of caste, to festering, callously-handled issues of nationalism and sub-nationalism in north east India and Jammu and Kashmir. As importantly, concerns accrue from deep socio-economic inequity; institutionalised corruption; issues of non-governance and misgoverning; and a lack of understanding that while India's glass may be perceived by some as being half full, the other half continues to be ruinously half empty.

There are several other issues of vulnerability, ranging from a growing population and consequent resource pressures, to the general "unemployability" of the great demographic bulge of India's youth, a situation further beset by continuing pressures of migration from rural to urban spaces.

In thinking circles—not officious circles that arrogantly define a poor person as one who earns less than Rs. 28 a day in rural areas and Rs. 32 a day in urban India—miscarriage of governance comes in for special mention as the root cause of ills, and it is generally agreed that unless this particular menace is not accepted and addressed from the political leadership down—cutting across parties and states—India's vulnerabilities, the threat to its democracy, will not decrease.

This is a wounded country. Largely, these wounds are located in what I term "Outland", a region that traverses the geographies of map and mind. To me, Outland is out of sight of the majority of Indians in

“Inland” and, therefore, outside of an easily-digestible construct. The poor of India everywhere, the identity-conscious of India in the country’s eastern and northern peripheries as well as in its tribal and caste heartlands, are trodden to the limit. They have for decades been driven largely by the principle adopted by rulers of India that people who occupy these spaces exist as pawns in power plays, mere adjuncts

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**Implicit in this very resilience is the DNA of weakness. A delusion, even, that constitutional adoption of democracy and its everyday, institutional drum-beating as a broad-spectrum antibiotic, is a guard against all manner of ills**


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to democratic pretension—not a species with definite aspirations and rights.

Jawaharlal Nehru’s speech at the time of India’s independence is made a mockery. He said, “Freedom and power bring responsibility” and that the “service of India means service of the millions who suffer...”

Tragically, while the central government or governments of states are in a position to guarantee the lessening of corruption; delivery of constitutionally mandated rights; delivery of 360-degree justice; and tamper-free delivery of development funds, a flourishing opposite is the norm.

There is an urgent need to break through the mall-stupor of Middle India and Policy India and continually tell this “mainstream” how poverty, corruption, displacement and denial are creating vast pools of negative energy across the country. If the government and India’s fattened middle choose to behave irresponsibly, it will be left to an active citizenry, media, judiciary, and those who take to violence to guarantee simple rights and dignities, to show the way.

Alas, it continues to be the story of our times: the unfinished story of democratic India’s integrity. 

*Sudeep Chakravarti is an independent analyst of socio-political and security issues in South Asia. A columnist and author, his non-fiction works include two critically acclaimed books, ‘Red Sun: Travels in Naxalite Country’ and ‘Highway 39: Journeys through a Fractured Land’ set in north east India. Chakravarti is a contributor to Gateway House.*

# Democracy begins at home

*We believe in participatory governance, especially at the local level. This can transform a locality into an ideal community. Our experience of working with the municipal corporation for bringing about changes in Colaba in South Mumbai demonstrates the potential of people's involvement in democracy on the ground*

MAKARAND NARWEKAR

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Democracy is most effectively practiced when ordinary people stop relying on a single person, or even a group of elected representatives, to transform their aspirations and hopes into reality. When each person actively begins to participate in resolving the issues in her/ his immediate neighbourhood, it makes their locales better places for everyone to live in.

In effect this means that we all have to be the change that we want to see. This vision, combined with a dearth of effective and efficient elected representatives, prompted me, along with a group of like-minded residents from the South Mumbai locality of Colaba, to participate in local elections in February 2012. Most of us are working professionals and new to politics, but we were clear that we had to enter the system and try and change it from the inside.

In many countries, political parties cannot participate in local governance. This was true in India too (at least officially, though on-the-ground party politics was closely intertwined with local elections), until the government of India introduced the Seventy-Fourth Amendment Act, 1992. This amendment to the Constitution permitted political parties to participate in elections to urban local bodies such as municipal corporations.

However, at the municipal—or urban administrative division—level of democracy, even if a candidate for election is associated with a powerful political party, citizens and civic issues have remained neglected. We in Colaba created a formula for winning the election: make no promises to the electorate; instead, awaken the spirit of participation in the community to ensure that development can take place by working together.

With this objective, we formed a group called 'My Dream Colaba.' We believe in participatory governance, especially at the local level, which can transform a locality into an ideal community where development is for the people and by the people.

Everyone who lives in Mumbai is closely connected—whether we realise this or not—with the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai, or the B.M.C.

(Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation). This interaction starts with registering births with the B.M.C. and goes on till death, when people need death certificates from the corporation. The B.M.C. is involved in a wide range of local issues such as maintenance of the roads and public transportation, supply of electricity, issues of public health and sanitation, the public education system, and maintenance of open spaces and public parks.

We realised that even though the B.M.C.—which in part or whole is mandated with all these and other portfolios—is so central and relevant to our everyday lives, many of us did not bother to engage with it except when absolutely necessary. While campaigning in Colaba for the municipal elections, we found that many citizens had almost no knowledge of the elected local representatives of their area, or of the centrality of the B.M.C. to their lives. To address this gap, we gave citizens basic lessons in civic issues. These were based in part on the practical experiences of our own campaign's daily engagement with the politics of local issues.

These realisations—that people often don't adequately grasp the importance of the B.M.C., and that people have to start seeing civic issues as their responsibility too—led us to double our efforts in conveying the message of participative governance. As a result of our campaign, Colaba, or Ward 227 (electoral or administrative divisions), got its first-ever elected citizens' representative in the B.M.C. I was the only independent candidate to win by a comfortable margin in elections in Mumbai's 227 municipal wards.

It is only a few months since this victory, but we have already taken steps towards realising our vision of 'My Dream Colaba.' We have opened new access roads, repaired broken pavements before the monsoon and revitalised malodorous streets. We accessed the layout of Colaba from the plans available at the B.M.C. This was a critical achievement, because it means that we will now know if precious land notified for a school or park is being used for running a bar or parking lot, or is going to be allotted for some purpose not specified in the plans.



To do all this, we worked with the B.M.C, and not against the corporation. The B.M.C. may not always function efficiently, but with people's involvement and vigilance, it was not too uphill a task for us to put in motion more effective systems for our ward. We assured the B.M.C that our intention is not to swim against the tide, but to ensure that there is no compromise in putting basic infrastructure in place. With a citizens' representative in the corporation, the residents of Colaba can now also keep an eye on the books and an ear open to discussions in the municipal corporation.

The change has been possible only because ordinary people came together as a group to participate in governance and development. This is the true spirit of democracy—and only this will ensure that people have decent housing, pavements are free of encroachment and are citizen-friendly, roads are well-lit and without potholes, garbage disposal is well-organised, unlicensed hawkers are cleared, and patches of land reserved as green zones are made available to the community.

'My Dream Colaba' has a long road ahead. But if we succeed, we have another dream—to replicate this model of governance in other parts of Mumbai, and to

**If we succeed, we have another dream—to replicate this model of governance in other parts of Mumbai, and to eventually make Mumbai an ideal metro for everyone. The dream can be scaled up too—local governance is after all the kernel for participation in larger democratic and legislative processes at the state and national levels**

eventually make Mumbai an ideal metro for everyone. The dream can be scaled up too—local governance is after all the kernel for participation in larger democratic and legislative processes at the state and national levels. This is the definition of a people's democracy in action.

*Makarand Narwekar is a lawyer and the only independent candidate to win the B.M.C. (Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation) elections in February 2012.*

# From profligacy to pragmatism

*India seems to be treading down the path of fruitless populism that crippled many countries in the past, most notably in Latin America. But like Latin America, India too can embark on a course-correction by implementing pragmatic economic policies alongside progressive but results-driven social spending*

ESTEFANIA MARCHAN

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Budget deliberations in the world's largest democracy are a contentious affair. With an increasing fiscal deficit, stubbornly high inflation, and growth at its slowest since 2008, there is broad displeasure with New Delhi's 2012-13 Budget, announced last March.

At the centre of the criticism are the government's extensive subsidies and poverty alleviation programmes, lambasted as populist and ill-executed. In the Eleventh Five-Year Plan, the government allocated over Rs. 1.8 lakh crores to 13 social programmes, and it will continue to spend Rs. 40,000 crores annually on fuel subsidies with little to show for it. When conjoined with inefficiency and corruption, the programmes have scarcely managed to reduce poverty by 1% a year. Agricultural growth remains weak at 2.5%, while subsidies mostly support a powerful minority of Indian farmers—none of whom pay taxes.

Most unfortunately, even as the number of Indian billionaires identified by Forbes magazine has reached 48, India remains home to the largest number of the world's poor and hungry.

A similar mix of fruitless populism and macroeconomic imbalances has crippled many countries in the past, most notably in Latin America. Now it seems India is treading down the path that once led to Latin America's economic collapse.

Latin America is a connoisseur of populist politics. Populism hit its peak during the 1920s through to the 1970s, when the working poor united behind icons like Brazil's Getúlio Vargas and Argentina's Juan Perón over their dissatisfaction with industrialisation. Populist governments granted immense benefits to the poor and chosen special interests—often paying for this with inflationary financing. [i]

By the 1980s, uncontrolled public spending resulted in excessive fiscal deficits, unsustainable public debt and intractable inflation. Latin America's Lost Decade followed. Growth, at 5.6% in the 1970s, shrunk to 1.3% and stagnated for another decade. By the 1990s,

inflation had reached 1000% in countries like Brazil, and the poor suffered exponentially. Large economies including Mexico, Argentina and Brazil languished, and up to half of Latin Americans slid into poverty. [ii]

India could be tempting its own lost decade with populist profligacy—and it is jeopardising its long-term growth trajectory. As Finance Minister, Pranab Mukherjee had set a goal of reducing the fiscal deficit to 5.1% of GDP in 2012-13, from 5.9% in 2011, but his last budget offered few sustainable means to accomplish this. Meanwhile, the largest poverty alleviation program, the proposed Food Security Bill, will add over Rs.1 lakh crores to expenditures with no plan for an equivalent increase in revenue.

It is not certain that the Public Distribution System, the engine to execute the Bill, will be able to efficiently deliver food to needy families; even less so, any other new vehicles of distribution. Although the Food Security Act is an important and necessary step to ensuring this basic social protection, it remains unclear whether without strong leadership and management this or other social programmes will reduce poverty and hunger.

So what can India do? Populist or not, an emphasis on inclusive development is essential. Perhaps the path that Latin America pursued to lead itself out of populism and into policies that are now pragmatic but also pro-poor, can be an example. The key to its success has been responsive and responsible leadership. In the last decade a new cadre of leaders has risen in Latin America, advocating economic pragmatism alongside progressive social agendas.

The most famous of these leaders are former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of the Workers Party of Brazil and his successor, Dilma Rousseff. There is also Chile's Ricardo Lagos and Michelle Bachelet, José Mujica of Uruguay, and Peru's Ollanta Umala, among others. Their blend of redistributive social policies combined with a more disciplined, market-friendly economic approach has given birth to a New Populist Consensus for Latin America.

Latin American governments increased social spending from 12% of GDP in 1990 to 18% in 2008 and introduced new social programs, including direct cash transfers, which have been adopted in 17 countries in the region.

**India's Food Security Bill has confusing cut-offs for poverty levels, lacks reach, and will depend on an already weak distribution system that lacks accountability. The risk of failure runs high. It would be better to simplify the Bill before adopting an inflexible framework into law**

These programmes have been executed while keeping inflation at bay and while maintaining economic stability. Chile, for example, implemented stronger banking regulations and financial safeguards, plus a counter-cyclical savings plan after the crisis in the 1980s. In 2009, it was invited to be part of the OECD, a group comprising the world's economically developed countries. Similarly, aided by improved terms of trade, many Latin American countries have reduced public debt and maintained surpluses for much of the past decade. The region has experienced healthier and higher growth rates and historic rates of poverty reduction.

However, there are two types of populism at work in the region. As Mexico's former Secretary of Foreign Affairs Jorge Castañeda points out in *Latin America's Left Turn*, one is mature and pragmatic, representing a real break from the past. The other is rather repressive, nationalist and amnesic about the pitfalls of unbridled populism. Relying on high oil revenues and high short-term prices of raw materials to finance steep expenditures, Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia are examples of this second type of populism.

What is striking is that although both have increased social spending, the pragmatic left has enacted more

redistributive and transparent social policies. Brazil's famous conditional cash transfer programme, Bolsa Família, is a powerful example. It has helped Brazil achieve the U.N.'s Millennium Development Goal of reducing extreme poverty and hunger by half and at a relatively low fiscal cost—about 0.5% of GDP. This is evidence of a well-managed social policy.

India can follow a similar pragmatic path if its leadership is prepared to demand results-driven social spending. A solid, technical framework needs to be in place to ensure the efficiency and sustainability of programmes before they are implemented or expanded. When Brazilian President Lula came to power in 2003, he expanded cash transfers nationally, but soon realised that an emboldened approach was not enough to catalyse concrete improvements. His government then simplified the programme. It merged overlapping schemes, set a single registry to identify beneficiaries, and created rules and incentives to promote efficient service delivery. [iii]

In contrast, India's Food Security Bill has confusing cut-offs for poverty levels, lacks reach, and will depend on an already weak distribution system that lacks accountability. The risk of failure runs high. It would be better to simplify the Bill before adopting an inflexible framework into law.

Populism is a term often used pejoratively. But modern Latin America illustrates that it can be a positive phenomenon if channelled to produce tangible and sustainable results. When an economy shows signs of weakness, criticism of populist policies becomes most damning. Yet Latin America has so far shown that prudent economic and progressive social policies are not mutually exclusive.

India will do well to bring the experience of its distant peers closer to home. After all, when populist measures stop reaching the poor, they soon also cease to yield political dividends.

[i] 'The return of populism.' 12 April 2006. The Economist . At: <http://www.economist.com/node/6802448>

[ii] Moreno, Luis Alberto. 'La década de América Latina y el Caribe: una oportunidad real.' Inter-American Development Bank (May 2011)

[iii] Marchán, Estefanía. 'India-Brazil: New models for cooperation.' Gateway House: Indian Council on Global Relations (February 2012)

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# Islamism and democracy

*The involvement of Islamists in democratic movements is often dismissed as a means to achieve power, after which democracy will be abolished. Yet there is strong evidence that people in Muslim-majority democracies support Islamist groups which challenge illegitimate government, rather than those who seek to replace secular autocracy with Islamic autocracy*

DANIEL JACOBIOUS MORGAN

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Pakistan is often cited as a worst-case example of the role political Islam can play in the infringement of minority rights, or in fostering terrorist violence. But no Islamist party in Pakistan has come even close to winning the country's national elections. In fact, the intensification of violent activity by Islamist groups directed at Islamabad does not represent the triumph of political Islam, but its failure. In recent history, Islamism has failed globally as an autocratic ideology; it has only succeeded when it won broad-based support and became a democratic movement.

According to its critics, Islamism is an insidious political creed, an early twentieth century construct which has more in common with fascism than the true spirit of Islam, and that *jihad* is Islamism taken to its logical conclusion. This characterisation has much to do with its origins: formulated during anti-colonial movements, its early ideologues rejected everything Western, including liberal democracy. This negative image was bolstered by its association with radicals and would-be autocrats since the 1930s, including Osama bin Laden and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's Sayyid Qutb.

One of the most influential advocates of Islamism was Abdul A'la Maududi, a journalist and religious propagandist born in 1903 in Aurangabad, in then undivided India. In the later decades of India's independence movement, he founded the Jamaat-i-Islami to promote his ideas. As plans for the partition of India unfolded, Maududi condemned the idea of Pakistan, because it was led by secular, Westernised politicians like Mohammed Ali Jinnah. Maududi insisted that Muslims should live in a society from which all non-Islamic elements were purged. Despite his early disapproval of the formation of the new nation, he moved to Pakistan in 1947, and spent the rest of his life fighting for a constitution based on a rigid interpretation of the religious law and freedom from materialistic Western influences, including freedom from liberal democracy. He argued instead for "theo-democracy", a rule of the religious.

Due to its focus on the distinction between Islam and Western "godless" secularism, Maududi's brand

of Islamism became a popular model for would-be revolutionaries in post-colonial states, where predominantly Muslim populations were governed by autocratic, notionally secular rulers backed by Western countries. Many of these leaders, like Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, employed the same secularism/Islam binary to argue that dictatorship was the only safeguard against religious fundamentalism—even as they used religious institutions to achieve legitimacy. In countries as diverse as Iran, Turkey and Egypt, Muslims were told that the doctrine of political Islam was not compatible with politics, whether autocratic or democratic.

Still, since the late 1970s, in many Muslim-majority states, elite groups arguing for secularism have been swept aside by people's movements for whom the centrality of Islam is an essential feature of political organisation. In none of these developments—revolutionary and democratic—did Islamism emerge as a top-down system.

In Turkey, the ruling Islamist Justice and Development Party (A.K.P.) emerged from a "Reformation" in rural Anatolia in the 1980s, spread by the region's largest Sufi order, the Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya. Even in Iran, the revolutionary leadership managed to harness genuine popular support (and arguably continues to do so) based on its religious authority, spreading the message of Ayatollah Khomeini. In both countries, deep social changes found expression in Islamist political movements that overwhelmed non-democratic forces.

In Pakistan however—where Maududi consolidated his ideology—Islamism did not take root. Muslims are more profoundly divided in Pakistan by sectarian, linguistic and ethnic affiliations. As a result, although Islamist parties have contested every national election in Pakistan's history, they have never won a significant proportion of the votes. The more material attractions of secular, populist parties have consistently trumped calls to impose the *shari'a*. When, in 2002, a coalition of Islamist parties formed the provincial government of the North West Frontier Province, it collapsed within three years as Deobandi, Barelwi, and Shia factions



argued about how to implement Islamic government. Pakistan's leading Islamist parties have only enjoyed widespread support when they have joined broad-based pro-democracy movements against military and civilian despots. The Jamaat-i-Islami took to the streets as part of Benazir Bhutto's Movement for the Restoration of Democracy in the 1980s. This demonstrates that Islamism and populism are not necessarily antagonistic.

The involvement of Islamists in democratic movements is sometimes dismissed as a means to achieve power through democratic elections, after

**Since the late 1970s, in many Muslim-majority states, elite groups arguing for secularism have been swept aside by people's movements for whom the centrality of Islam is an essential feature of political organisation. In none of these developments—revolutionary and democratic—did Islamism emerge as a top-down system**

which democracy will be abolished. Yet there is strong evidence that people in Muslim majority democracies support Islamist groups which challenge illegitimate government, rather than those who seek to replace secular autocracy with Islamic autocracy.

When Maududi's Islamist party joined the government of the hard-line General Zia-ul Haq and attempted to enforce his unpopular Islamising programme in the late 1970s, its electoral support halved in eight years, winning a third of the seats it contested in 1977 and just under 15% in 1985. While Islamist movements may initially have been pushed into accepting democratic participation for short-term tactical reasons, they have learned from hard experience that they could not succeed without developing broad-based support.

This is a lesson that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood learned early. It has evolved from an anti-democratic, revolutionary group to become an institutionalised political actor. In the process, its leadership abandoned an early disdain for Western systems to make their party an important democratic player in Egypt, with its members contesting nearly every election since 1984. Although its earlier ideologues, including founder Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb, rejected multi-party pluralism (though not necessarily electoral democracy), the Muslim Brotherhood now seems committed to it, both in theory and practice. For instance, in 1984, the Muslim Brotherhood allied with the Wafd Party, a secular and liberal political party, and in 1987 it formed a tripartite alliance with the socialist Labour Party and the Liberal Party. Even the slogan that has caused much disquiet in the Western media—"al-Islam huwa al-Hall" ("Islam is the solution")—was originally coined as an electoral slogan. Their commitment to Islamism is profoundly shaped by their democratic experience.

During this process, an older generation's anti-democratic positions have been sidelined by a younger generation committed to democratic processes, including but not limited to multi-party elections. The Brotherhood party uses religious terminology alongside a commitment to institutional and economic development rather than to theology. The content of its political programme, as outlined in its 2007 manifesto and the recent Renaissance Project, is analogous to those of leading Islamic—though not necessarily Islamist—parties in other Muslim majority democracies.

In Muslim-majority states as diverse as Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia and Pakistan, democratic politics since the late 1980s have been dominated by parties which blend moderate religious conservatism with an economic right-of-centre platform. The popularity and electoral success of parties such as the Pakistan Muslim League, Turkey's Justice and Development Party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Indonesia's Golkar-led coalition and Malaysia's United Malays National Organisation, are all evidence of this trend.

In Muslim-majority democracies around the world, it is only a small minority—the inflexible Islamists and inflexible secularists—who argue for a total separation of religion and democracy. In these democracies, Islamism has only succeeded where it has evolved from a despotic "theo-democracy" as envisaged by Maududi, into a true Islamic democracy.

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# The precondition of democracy in China

*The environmental movement in China, and the people involved in it, like many of the country's other burgeoning social movements, are not calling for democracy. They are using various strategies to demand one of democracy's preconditions—the rule of law*

**SPIKE NOWAK**

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Social movements against the government's practices are gathering momentum throughout China. The one-child policy is openly being questioned, frequent protests are erupting over land acquisitions, factory workers are rioting over poor working conditions, and China's social media is giving citizens a new avenue to voice their outrage against corruption in the government.

As China's next generation of leaders prepares to take the reins of a rapidly-changing country, Beijing can no longer pursue unbridled economic growth while ignoring its environmental consequences. Across the Middle Kingdom citizens are taking to the street and protesting—sometimes violently—for a cleaner, healthier environment. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on environmental issues are courting influential leaders in Beijing and pushing legal and political boundaries in order to take a stand against the practices that have made China the world's biggest emitter of carbon dioxide.

The environmental movement in China, and the people involved in it, like many of the country's other burgeoning social movements, are not calling for democracy. They are calling for one of democracy's preconditions—the rule of law. At the local level, people are marching in protest against injustices that would not occur if China's laws were fully enforced by local governments. At the central level, lawyers are attempting to force Beijing to obey its own laws.

Both parts of this two-tiered movement—a highly organised network of NGOs with close government relations, and frequent and isolated citizen-led protests at the local level—are striving for the same goal: the enforcement of already existing environmental laws and regulations. The main difference between the NGOs and the local protests are the methods they use—cooperative support versus confrontational demonstration.

Tsinghua University professor Sun Liping estimates the number of “mass incidents”—party-speak for protests—in China in 2010 at more than 180,000. Many of these were sparked by environmental concerns. Most of these demonstrations involve less than a few

dozen people, but many of them are much larger and manage to garner international attention. In July 2012, thousands of protesters marched in the city of Shifang in Sichuan province in south west China, against plans to build a multi-million dollar copper plant in the city. The incident was widely reported in both domestic and international media. Three days after the protests began the local government announced that it had scrapped plans to build the plant.

The Chinese government expends an enormous effort in keeping these incidents out of the public eye and, more importantly, isolated. According to China's Ministry of Finance, the country will spend \$111 billion on internal security in 2012. A report by the U.S. Congressional Research Service estimated that in 2005 the Chinese government had 30,000 persons working on internet censorship and at preventing collective action; that number will likely have risen. Even China's well-established environmental NGOs have not found a way to get around these barriers to coordination.

All NGOs in China have to register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, which has the power to revoke an NGO's legal status if it becomes “threatening” to the State. This severely restricts the ability of NGOs to organise their members and promote environmental causes, because in Beijing's eyes there is a thin line between advocacy and provocation. In fact, established environmental NGOs rarely support local environmental protests even when government wrongdoing is egregiously evident, because doing so puts the organisation's existence at stake.

However, this does not mean the NGOs working on environmental issues are powerless. The close relationship between the NGOs and the government allows the NGOs to negotiate the blurry legal and political boundary between what is acceptable and what is forbidden. This enables them to push those boundaries without stepping over the line and having their legal status revoked.

These close ties also allow the leaders of environmental NGOs to form alliances with government officials, which is of crucial importance in a country where

knowing the right person makes all the difference. For example, Green Earth Volunteers (GEV) was able to use its contacts with the State Environmental Protection Agency to obtain environmental reports on a proposed project to build 13 hydroelectric dams on the Nu River in Yunnan province in south west China. Another NGO, Friends of Nature, used its connections to convey GEV's reports to influential government officials. In 2004 Premier Wen Jiabao temporarily halted work on the dams pending further research (however, plans to build the dams are part of the China's 12th Five-Year Plan).


Close relationships with the central government also allow NGOs to confront and monitor local governments. The founder of the Center for Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims, Wang Canfa, believes that only 10% of China's environmental laws and regulations are actually enforced.

With the state's insufficient ability to oversee and enforce these laws, NGOs perform a watchdog-like function for officials in Beijing. When a Beijing-based NGO, the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs, provided consumers with a list of known polluters and their products, a State Environmental Protection Agency official went so far as to say, "This is a brilliant boost to the enforcement of environmental laws."

While NGOs work with the central government to help enforce China's environmental regulations, protesters work against local governments and

**In Beijing's eyes there is a thin line between advocacy and provocation. In fact, established environmental NGOs rarely support local environmental protests even when government wrongdoing is egregiously evident, because doing so puts the organisation's existence at stake**

polluters to achieve similar ends. By pushing the state at two different levels, China's environmental movement has joined China's civil rights lawyers and dissidents, and China's journalists and social media, in holding the government accountable.

Some China-watchers believe these various forms of discontent spell the end for the Party's autocratic reign and signal the beginning of a democratic China. But these beliefs are likely to be misplaced. The end result of activism such as the two-tiered environmental movement will not be democracy. Instead, expect a more open society as Chinese citizens increase their demands for Beijing to actually implement laws. 

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