

Lessons in democratic patience

The Sri Lankan transition was smoothly managed. Check Bangladesh for contrast. They forced their incumbent into exile, and installed a mostly unelectable govt of non-political people

On the day Sri Lankans vote to elect their new President in a close election, it is useful to remind ourselves of how maturely and calmly they've managed the transition after the climactic events just over a couple of years ago. They are choosing from three familiar faces in their mainstream politics, and there is no instability.

Herein lies a very important lesson: Nations and societies will sometimes have upheavals. Many will self-destruct as a result or go into a rinse-repeat cycle of change and instability. Those who survive — and probably also emerge stronger — will need that one greatly under-appreciated attribute: Democratic patience. What is it, and how does it work?

Sri Lanka first. In July 2022, the world looked in awe at the pictures of protestors ransacking the presidential palace, collecting souvenirs, swimming in its pool and making reels. The government was swept aside. What didn't result, however, was a vacuum in which random protesters, student leaders, NGOs, or busybody dual-passport holders could move in.

Contrast this with Bangladesh. They forced their incumbent into exile. An unelected and unelectable government of NGOs, students, technocrats, and closet Islamists moved in. They're now calling in native academics from overseas to write a new Constitution. They've given magistracy powers to all commissioned officers, thereby formally bringing the army into governance. Call it Pakistan Lite.

Both neighbours had similar upheavals. How did one manage the transition smoothly, while the other never even tried? Add Nepal to the mix. A mass movement and an armed Maoist insurgency ended the monarchy. In democracy's 16 years since, the country has seen eight Prime Ministers share 16 short terms. But they are steadfastly working on making their democracy better. They are blessed with democratic patience.

Democracy is messy. Generals, dictators, Ayatollahs, and Nobel laureates look and sound so different, virtuous and smooth. The countries that fall for the temptation of their apolitical promise are the ones that haven't yet matured to endure the mess, heat and dust, and low points inevitable in a democracy. If you haven't got that patience, you look for shortcuts. See Bangladesh.

The Sri Lankan transition was smooth, with familiar political faces brought in, among them the current incumbent and candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe, 75, the last of their long marchers. Sri Lankans didn't trade democracy with an import,

either from some neighbours or global foundations loaded with the breathtaking belief that they can democratise poor, unsophisticated Third World countries. That's why whether Mr Wickremesinghe wins or loses, it will only strengthen our argument.

In describing his politics and position, he has said he took over when a political vacuum loomed. Now, it was up to the people to choose their new President, and he would accept it. He became a junior minister at 28, has been Prime Minister and President multiple times. The protesters in 2022 wanted change. If Mr Wickremesinghe represents anything, it is continuity. He was accepted as a credible choice because of his democratic familiarity. He stabilised the ship and has submitted himself to an election on the due date.

Back to the question: Why do some nations manage these upheavals successfully and others go to pieces? We could go back more than two decades

and begin with what were grandly called the "Colour Revolutions" in the former Soviet or Soviet sphere territories: Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Yugoslavia, even Ukraine.

"Colour Revolutions" because protesters often wore shirts in a particular colour denoting the uprising in each country. This was succeeded by the Arab Spring and its Tahrir Square. Each ended disastrously, either bringing in a fresh dictatorship, or a break-

up of the country (Yugoslavia).

Google New Delhi + 2011 + Ramila Maidan + Tahrir Square. See what it throws up. Then lean back, take a deep breath and reflect on how we tossed the same poisoned chalice. Google will tell you that there were enough smart people calling the Anna Movement "India's Tahrir Square". It looked like everybody wanted change, a new system, and though it wasn't said as such, a new Constitution. Why, because *mera neta chor hai* (my politician is a thief).

The war cry was, "We must change the system." Ultimately, all that changed was the government through elections. India was saved from a Tahrir Square calamity. The fuel of that movement was impatience with our political status quo, democracy that put in power "*anpadh aur ganwaar*" (illiterate country bumpkins)—a description used by liberal actor Om Puri on Anna Hazare's stage. This politics had to go and smart, educated people, Nobel laureates, Magsaysay Award winners, must take over. Enough is enough.

The middle class and the upper crust were both

on board, with assorted freelancers: Liberals, libertarians, leftists, right-nationalists, anarchists—and most of the media, especially news TV. Who wouldn't hop onto such a TRP-friendly moral pulpit? Some media stars spoke on Anna's stage, some exhorted the army brass to join him. In 1975, by the way, Indira Gandhi had used as her justification for the Emergency Jayaprakash Narayan's relatively harmless call to the armed and police forces to not follow "unlawful" orders. Manmohan Singh was no Indira. There are three reasons we escaped this catastrophe.

The first, that whatever the "*hawa*" then, "everybody" did not want this change. The chattering classes, TV channels, NGO leaders, film actors, and superstar anchors are not "everybody". India's system sustains on the billion and a half who believe in it. That's why nobody of any consequence in the establishment, civil or military, joined the movement. Nobody except our holy national chief accountant, if indirectly.

The second, because the political class fought back. To see how well, watch the video recording of the Lok Sabha session on the Jan Lokpal Bill on August 25, 2011. As I noted in a National Interest published two days later, a most devastating point was made by the late Sharad Yadav. "Before you junk this system," he said, "remember that without the wisdom of Gandhi and Ambedkar, people like me wouldn't even be allowed to bring their cattle to graze in New Delhi."

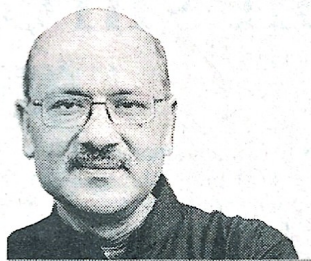
This House, he said, is the only place where you can see the faces of the entire nation, where Dalits stand as equals, and names like Ghurau Ram, Garib Ram and Pakodi Lal walk around as MPs. A Pakodi Lal or Garib Ram would characterise the vast Indian mass much more than any Nobel laureate. And that the masses believe in their Constitutional system. That's the third reason India's Tahrir Square folded up.

A smooth electoral transition followed three years later, and the same politics subsumed the sharpest leaders of the movement, while Anna Hazare, its self-anointed Mahatma Gandhi, faded away into an item number. A clown as he always was, if an angry one now.

India emerged stronger from this because its poorest people had democratic patience. As do Nepal and Sri Lanka's. Add America's rejection of Doland Trump's desperate bid to overturn the 2020 result with that invasion of Capitol Hill. The Bangladeshis have displayed the opposite. Unelected caretakers there want to confect a new Constitution without the politicians and then hold elections, just like any garden variety Pakistani dictator. Odds are that they will end up not in a very good place.

If you don't have patience for its din and chaos, you do not deserve democracy. Our hypothesis is being put to the test all at the same time next door: In Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

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