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Published paper

Adeney, Katharine and Wyatt, Andrew (2004) *Democracy in South Asia: Getting beyond the Structure-Agency Dichotomy*. *Political Studies*, 52 (1). pp. 1-18.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2004.00461.x>

Democracy in South Asia: Getting beyond the Structure–Agency Dichotomy

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With reference to South Asia, we argue that recourse to the conventional structuralist and transition accounts of democratisation sustains an unhelpful dichotomy. Those approaches tend towards either determinism or agent-driven contingency. In contrast, an alternative approach that recognises the relevance of both structure and agency is proposed. In certain circumstances, human agency opens up the possibility of the relatively rapid transformation of structures. In particular, there are periods of political openness when structures are malleable, and individuals, or individuals acting collectively, are able to reshape structures. Decolonisation both constituted a moment of transition and opened up the possibility of structural change in the context of enhanced elite agency. For the purposes of comparison, the discussion covers the three cases of India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Particular attention is drawn to political parties and the structure of ethnic diversity as leading explanatory variables.

Democratisation in ex-colonial states has been patchy. Unusually, India and Sri Lanka have maintained and consolidated a democratic system of government, though neither achieved this feat with an unblemished record. In India, Indira Gandhi suspended the democratic process during the internal Emergency of 1975–77. Sri Lanka has maintained its democracy since independence, but the long-running civil war has damaged the political infrastructure. India has also witnessed ethnic violence between the centre and the ‘periphery’. However, India and Sri Lanka, when compared with most states in Africa and in South-East Asia, and in South Asia itself, have been successful democracies. Across most of India, democracy has consolidated, so that, in the words of Linz and Stepan, democracy has become ‘the only game in town’ (1996, p. 5). Similarly, democracy has consolidated in the Sri Lankan Sinhala heartland, though the character of the constitution remains contested. India has not managed to reduce inequalities between its citizens, the majority of whom still live on the land and are illiterate and poor. Although we accept the normative view that democratic development is incomplete and that the autonomy of citizens needs expanding in South Asia, we recognise that liberal representative democracy is a worthwhile goal in spite of its failure to eliminate socio-economic inequality. In India, the expanding circle of democratic participation since independence has transformed the character of politics as previously subordinate groups have gained a voice (Varshney, 2000).

Despite problems, both India and Sri Lanka contrast radically with the case of Pakistan. Pakistan has experienced periods of procedural democracy in which national elections were held (1971–77, 1988–99 and 2002). Yet democratic consolidation has remained elusive, and Pakistanis have never had an opportunity to vote a government out of office.¹ Each of the post-1988 civilian governments was removed from office, and caretaker administrations installed pending fresh elections, at the behest of senior figures in the military. In 1999, General Pervez Musharraf deposed Prime Minister Sharif in an outright coup, and the 2002 elections were carefully controlled. Yet Pakistan ostensibly possesses the same colonial legacy as India and Sri Lanka, inhabiting the same geographical area and facing similar challenges of state, nation and economic construction.

South Asian countries have therefore differed widely in their democratic development and consolidation. However, the focus in this paper will be on the *transition* to democracy. We will focus on a ‘critical juncture’ – decolonisation – as a factor that enabled elite agency. Therefore, we will only consider the states that experienced this common critical juncture – India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. In explaining the outcomes, we will give an account of the contribution made by elite actors during this period of political change. However, we will argue that the outcomes were not simply the result of contingent events shaped by the intentions of key political leaders. We will examine the extent to which structures constrained or enabled elite agency during this period. We will argue that the extent to which political parties were integrated with society was a key structural factor enabling leaders to shape political outcomes and rise above other significant structural factors such as class that could have inhibited the emergence of democracy. We will also note that the structure of ethnic diversity was a particular challenge during the process of democratic transition.

The Qualified Relevance of Economic, Cultural and External Factors

Comparative works on democratisation have tended to treat Asia, and especially South Asia, as a place apart. Huntington (1993) included Pakistan in his discussion of the ‘third wave’ of democratisation, but India and Sri Lanka democratised well before then. More recently, attention has focused on East Asian democratisation and the relationship between the state, market and civil society. Even those more sophisticated modernisation theorists who have included South Asia within their variables Vanhanen being the most explicit – still leave some questions unanswered; for example, India only becomes democratic according to Vanhanen’s model when the party system fragments (1997, pp. 141–5). Classic modernisation theories that correlate prosperity and democracy cannot account for India and Sri Lanka. Similarly, there appears to be little correlation between periods of economic growth and democratic consolidation within Pakistan (which has had higher growth figures than India for much of the period since 1947).

Cultural and external variables *have* been used to explain differential democratic development in South Asia (Huntington, 1993; Jalal, 1995). Although we contend that these emphases are frequently misplaced, we will consider the influence of culture and external factors before we turn to the main thrust of the argument.

The relationship between culture and democracy has been emphasised, with some authors arguing that democracy rests on a 'civic culture' (Almond and Verba, 1963) or, more recently, that levels of social capital determine democratic outcomes (Putnam *et al.*, 1993). Some, such as Huntington (1993) and Fukuyama (1993), advanced a bolder thesis in which the religious culture of a state is linked to its democratic trajectory. The supposed incompatibility of Islam and democracy features in discussions of South Asia. We do not find this explanation to be persuasive. Islam is a religion marked by significant internal differences. Some tenets are unfavourable to democracy, such as the creation of an Islamic state, the laws of which are dictated by the will of God rather than the people (Huntington, 1993, pp. 18–19). However, Islam is also premised on a notion of equality – the fundamental root of democratic theory, albeit not liberal-democratic theory. To be fair, Huntington did not argue that Islam *necessarily* precludes the development of a democratic state, but his argument leans heavily in that direction. Cultural explanations are inapplicable to South Asia for two further reasons. First, Pakistan, even with its Muslim majority, was not constituted as an Islamic state. Islamic parties such as Jamiat-i-Islami opposed the creation of Pakistan in 1947 on these grounds. Throughout its chequered democratic history, political parties campaigning on the 'Islamic ticket' have traditionally performed badly, securing, on average, 3–4 percent of the vote. The results of the October 2002 election were an aberration in this regard, influenced by international factors. The lack of a consolidated democracy in Pakistan cannot be attributed to the Muslim majority in its population, given the weakness of political Islam. Second, the notionally 'tolerant' and 'accommodating' religions of Hinduism and Buddhism do not provide a satisfactory explanation for democratic outcomes in India and Sri Lanka. Hinduism and Buddhism have not prevented the states in which they are a majority religion from coercing members of their own religion or, more often, those of another (as in the cases of the Sikhs in the Punjab, the tribals in north-east India, the Muslims in Kashmir, and the Tamils in north-east Sri Lanka). To argue that religious culture has no bearing on social life and organisation in these states would be nonsensical, but to argue that these religious beliefs independently dictate democratic outcomes would be to attribute to them a cohesiveness that they do not possess. We are also reluctant to concede the radical cultural differences implied by such arguments, given that India and Pakistan share many cultural influences.

Explanations of democratic outcomes making use of external factors take three forms. First, demonstration effects are very important in explaining why 'waves' of democratisation occur or subside – as was so clearly the case in the Eastern European transitions and subsequent democratisation in Africa. Second, external factors can take the form of pressures in favour of, or in opposition to, democratisation. Furthermore, the direction of policy can change abruptly, as the US demonstrated with regard to Pakistan after 11 September 2001. Finally, democratisation is less likely to occur when a country is under threat, because the armed forces are more powerful and ruling elites are less likely to risk the uncertainty of a transition during a period of conflict. Thus, Jalal argued that the perceived threat that India posed to Pakistan strengthened the anti-democratic elements in the state (1995, pp. 22–3). However, India was not without enemies. Although Pakistan did not threaten India's survival, China posed a more serious challenge. Despite this,

the 1962 conflict did not arrest the process of democratisation or alter the balance of civil–military relations in India. Jalal’s argument concerning the external threat really reveals that it *enabled* (a term we will return to later) military elites to exploit Pakistan’s geopolitical location to consolidate their power. It did not directly lead them to power, but it facilitated a process that was already well under way. In short, external factors cannot be discounted. Yet external influences cannot form the basis of monocausal explanations in South Asia – they facilitate elite agents and structures within the societies. They do not create these agents and structures. They are an enabling or constraining factor, but no more than that. Although we are alert to external factors, we will focus on internal agents and structures.

Explaining Democratisation using Agency and Structure Separately

Transition theory concentrates on the contribution of political elites to transitions to democracy (Di Palma, 1990; O’Donnell *et al.*, 1986; Przeworski, 1991; Rustow, 1970). As Whitehead argued: ‘given the strong elements of contingency that characterize most democratic transitions, it is of very real significance to the dynamics of the process which type of leader prevails’ (1999, p. 87). Thus, the emphasis is on the agency of political actors. Their actions and choices are seen to have a decisive impact on democratic outcomes. However, these actions may not be intentional and ‘may eventually bring about political regime changes that were neither anticipated nor desired by any of the participants at the beginning of the process’ (Kitschelt, 1992, p. 1028).

Transition theorists have emphasised the pacts made between elites that lead to a negotiated transition to democracy. They hold that these pacts can result in a compromise – a political crafting of the mechanisms of transition to democracy (Linz and Stepan, 1996). Democratisation does not have to result from the transition – there are many possible outcomes, and democratisation is reversible (Schmitter, 1994, p. 18). These pacts often result in suboptimal outcomes. In the terminology of O’Donnell *et al.* (1986), the moderates of the old regime have to be accommodated by reformers based outside the regime. If this accommodation does not take place, there is no incentive for the moderates to help in the establishment of a democratic system. However, chaos is the worst outcome for *both* moderates and reformers. It is this that propels them to compromise and to restrain their respective radical and hard-line allies.

Agency-centred approaches to democratisation face a number of objections. They do not lend themselves to a social-scientific approach that looks for regular observable relationships between separate phenomena from which generally applicable theories can be derived. Thus, they possess no predictive power, and analysis is confined to individual cases rather than generalised comparisons. They emphasise that ‘variations in political outcomes are best addressed by starting with the motivations, preferences, and calculations of self-interested actors’ (Bratton and van de Walle, 1997, p. 24). Although this focus allows us to understand and expect innovation in democratic outcomes, even if no democratic system has previously existed, it also means that any outcome is as likely as any other. Although charismatic individuals undeniably influence the course of events, a ‘great man’ approach

also falls prey to voluntarism by assuming that outcomes are the result of an individual politician's intention. The assumption that there are no intervening factors that might influence the action or the outcome is simplistic. The possibility that political leaders might be constrained by economic, social and institutional factors is minimised. It also overlooks the possibility that intentions may not be realised through the lack of perfect information or the result of another powerful actor's preferences.

In contrast to the agency-centred theorists, 'structure-orientated scholars typically assume that historical actors face extremely narrow choice sets *or* that their rational choices are clearly constrained by the distribution of resource endowments' (Kitschelt, 1992, p. 1028). For example, some Marxist accounts explain political history as an outcome of social change driven by economic developments. 'Once constructed, institutional edifices have inertia – and social trends have momentum – that generally exceed human intent and control' (Bratton and van de Walle, 1997, p. 22). Structuralism overcomes the disadvantage of agency-centred approaches by drawing attention to broader social forces, and cases can therefore be analysed comparatively. Moore (1967) and Rueschemeyer *et al.* (1991) offered structural theories of democratisation, assessing the influence of slowly changing social structures, specifically class structures, though they differ over which class they promoted as 'democratic'. Elites are not discussed at length, though Rueschemeyer *et al.* did not ignore them entirely, and it is assumed that individual action is heavily determined by social circumstance.

According to class-based structural theories of democratisation, democracy becomes possible as the social forces that favour authoritarian rule alter in favour of new social coalitions. Unlike agency-centred theories, they are pessimistic about democratisation being possible in all situations – thus limiting the impact of elite innovation. It could be argued that class action is purposeful and intentional, thereby fitting more closely with the agency approach, but this injects a note of confusion into the debate. The power of classes is not autonomous. It is grounded in economic resources. In addition, although Rueschemeyer *et al.* treated classes as collective actors, they conceded that 'the political postures of given classes are not infinitely variable ... we expect ... classes to exhibit definite central political tendencies in the struggle for political democracy' (1991, p. 5). Although there is a role for collective agency in their analysis, this is a rather different perspective from the one articulated by process-orientated transition theorists. Generally, the structuralist approach marginalises the importance of politics as a separate and autonomous domain of social activity. Structuralist approaches run the risk of determinism, which represents history as an inevitable process that individuals are unable to influence (Hay, 1995, p. 195). As the example of South Asia, with the elite-driven contingencies of partition, demonstrates, this is manifestly not the case.

Structural theories of democracy can also be criticised for their deterministic outlook. Democratisation projects have succeeded in countries that did not possess the same class relations as those in the West. Similarly, authors such as Moore (1967) prematurely labelled Germany and Japan as fascistic states – both are now democracies. Structural theorists have also assumed that class means the same

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thing in different societies and have to assume that it will have the same impact in widely differing situations. According to Moore's argument, India's class relations were not conducive to democratisation. He therefore had to explain the emergence of democracy on the grounds that the departure of the British weakened the agricultural elite upon which they had based much of their power (1967, p. 371). The emergent urban elites were consequently estranged from the agricultural elites, and this prevented a coalition emerging against peasants and workers that would have led to fascism. However, Moore did not address how the agricultural elite managed to retain their preponderance in the territorial area that became Pakistan, whereas they did not in India. These structuralist explanations of democratisation have concentrated heavily on class and have not considered other structural and institutional factors. Although Therborn (1977) considered the impact of war on the development of democracy and Rueschemeyer *et al.* (1991) discussed state-society and transnational power relations, class is *still* held to be the leading variable in these accounts, and the other factors are considered for their impact on transforming relations between classes.

An Alternative Approach

Neither agency-centred nor structural explanations of political phenomena are therefore sufficient. Some in each school of thought have attempted to incorporate elements of the other. Rustow's (1970) stipulation of a consolidated national identity as a prerequisite for a successful transition built in a structural element to his approach. Some have emphasised elite compacts that determine the incorporation of groups into the system. Thus, Collier and Collier (1991), with reference to Latin America, gave accounts of elites changing structures to facilitate or hinder the inclusion of particular groups. This process of inclusion or exclusion encourages or delays democratic development. Similarly, even agency-centred theorists argue that it is only under certain conditions that elites agree to entrench bargaining as a rule of the game and therefore democratise. However, although there exists some overlap between the approaches, the ultimate element that determines whether a transition to democracy occurs is very different. The implicit separation of structure and agency creates an unhelpful dichotomy (Lewis, 2002). Bratton and van de Walle argued that 'a contingency theory can gain analytical purchase only when placed on some kind of structural scaffolding that imparts a motif to political action' (1997, p. 26). However, what is this 'structural scaffolding'? Braudel described the structures that shape history as

the ceaseless constraints imposed by geography, by social hierarchy, by collective psychology and by economic need – all profound forces, barely recognized at first, especially by contemporaries, to whom they always seem perfectly natural, to be taken wholly for granted if they are thought about at all. These realities are what we now call structures.

(1994, pp. 27–8)

He went on to argue that structures are 'long-lived ... and hard to change overnight', though, as will become clear, we take a more nuanced position (p. 29). Braudel's definition encompasses social structures; but in discussing structure and agency in South Asia, it is vital to take *political* structures into account. In partic-

ular, we take the view that institutions, and their structural arrangement, can shape elite agency. For example, the choice between parliamentary or presidential systems and the type of electoral systems can be very significant. That said, institutions, such as political parties, can also be transformed by determined agency, possibly over a much shorter timescale than background social structures (Alexander, 2001, p. 252). These social and political structures enable or constrain behaviour through binding rules or incentives. In other words, they can take on formal or informal institutional forms. Structures are enduring, but they are not immune from change in the face of individual or collective agency (Cerny, 2000, p. 437). This is a necessarily wide definition.

In rejecting the structure–agency dichotomy, we argue for more intuitive work on South Asia. Others have discussed the interaction of structure and agency with regard to cases outside of South Asia, but the full significance of this approach has not been explored within the region.² Elite politics and choices have clearly played a large role in the democratisation or otherwise of South Asia, but they are not the only story. Democratisation projects failed in Pakistan, even when elites professed allegiance to the democratic cause and set about creating democratic constitutions. Likewise, similar structures have created very different outcomes – here, we are thinking of the parliamentary and federal institutions shaped during the colonial period, ethnic diversity, ideas and class allegiances.³ Some authors have emphasised regional differences in political development during the period of British colonial rule (Jaffrelot, 2002; Talbot, 1998). However, we contend that there were other structures and institutions that, had they been in existence, would have enabled elites to overcome the structural forces working against democratisation. This is a particularly important consideration in the case of Pakistan.

Human agency or historical contingencies open up the possibility of the relatively rapid transformation of structures, though some may be more enduring than others. There are periods of political openness when institutions are malleable, and individuals, or individuals acting collectively, are able to reshape them. Structural and institutional change is more likely during these ‘critical junctures’. Collier and Collier (1991) used these critical junctures as a way of explaining democratisation as they detailed the incorporation of the working class in Latin America by state-run institutions. This is consistent with the observation that events that occur early in a process of political change may achieve great significance later (Pierson, 2000, p. 263). The institutional changes possible during a formative period may cease to be possible later. Elite actions during a critical juncture explain different outcomes.

The obvious critical juncture in South Asia was decolonisation. We seek to explain why very different democratic outcomes emerged from this critical juncture. Structures and institutions work to disadvantage some actors, and structures generally constrain the choices that actors can make. However, elites may be *enabled* by institutions and structures to make autonomous choices. Elites can exercise considerable influence over events and structures at moments of critical juncture, but this should not imply that their actions are entirely determined by structures at other points. In short, structures and institutions can enhance or constrain agency.

We are particularly concerned to explain why elites in India managed to act relatively autonomously of class structures antithetical to democracy, whereas in Pakistan they failed to do so. Continuity in political leadership was an obvious difference, but we argue for a broader analysis. We argue that the structure of ethnic diversity of the three South Asian cases under discussion, as well as the nature of their political parties at the critical juncture of decolonisation, were critical variables shaping the political possibilities for the post-colonial states.

Political parties are the first independent variable we use. It is hard to conceive of a democratic system without parties. Randall and Svasand (2002) argued that parties can make an important contribution to transitions, especially during the later stages when the repressive regime has compromised or been overthrown. Political parties in India were significant institutions *before* the departure of the British. Therefore, although decolonisation was a critical juncture, structures that facilitated the transition to democracy emerged in the late colonial period. As Randall and Svasand argued:

Especially relevant to the circumstances of transition ... will be the parties' role in the recruitment and still more the training of political elites, in organising 'responsible' opposition to government, and more broadly in conflict resolution and institutionalizing democratic behaviour and attitudes. (2002, p. 8)

The final role is especially relevant to our argument that the extent of integration of these parties with society, a process begun well before decolonisation, increased elite agency. South Asian states with weakly institutionalised parties have found the transition to democratic rule difficult. Political vacuums emerged that favoured undemocratic forces. Weakly institutionalised parties have compromised with class structures rather than transcending them. Although compromise is central to transition theory, not all compromises and pacts result in democratisation. All parties in South Asia had to reach compromises with undemocratic classes, but not all of them possessed the strength to transcend the undemocratic preferences of these classes. The inclusiveness of these parties was also an important feature of the ability to reach agreement on the 'rules of the game'.

Our second independent variable is the structure of ethnic diversity. This links to the existing literature in so far as ethnicity is often connected to the creation of a national identity – a precursor to democratisation in Western Europe. Most post-colonial states were extremely heterogeneous, and a consolidated national identity, which Rustow (1970) considered to be a condition of democratisation, remained elusive in many cases. Heterogeneity does not preclude democracy, as India demonstrates, but a shared national identity makes it easier for a government to make difficult decisions in the aftermath of transition and to overcome social inequalities (Bunce, 2000, p. 719; Schmitter, 1994, p. 22). The South Asian cases under discussion demonstrate that, although a shared national identity is *not* a prerequisite for democratisation, when the nature of the 'nation' and the territorial boundaries of a state are contested, problems emerge – especially when a very heterogeneous society has a dominant group. Democratisation is not impossible in such societies, but that dominant group has to create a political system in which all groups have a chance of effective representation.⁴ Tensions have emerged

where this has not happened in South Asia, especially when non-dominant groups are territorially concentrated and the case for secession has an obvious logic. These two variables can be linked. Political parties in South Asia that have been able to accommodate ethnic diversity are integrated more effectively with society. This has been conducive to democratic transition and consolidation.

India

In contrast to Jaffrelot (2002, p. 259), we argue that the contribution of political parties to democratisation in India and Pakistan has been crucial. The contribution of the Indian National Congress to the transition to democracy in India has been evaluated positively by Manor (1990) and Das Gupta (1989). Manor argued that the federal structure of the movement encouraged pluralism and supported the transition to democratic rule after 1947 (1990, pp. 28–9). The Congress, like the United National Party in Sri Lanka and the Muslim League in Pakistan, had elitist roots. However, it had taken on a mass character by the end of the 1920s. As an all-India movement with a functioning organisation, it was a more effective mediator than other parties in the region in the 1940s. It fulfilled many of the functions expected of parties in the transition to, and consolidation of, democracy (Randall and Svasand, 2002). In particular, it mediated effectively between the state and society. The linguistic reorganisation of its provincial units (PCCs) in 1921 enabled it to co-opt the masses into the nationalist movement. The co-option of politicians speaking vernacular languages rather than Hindi or English was an important step in the creation of a 'national' Congress.⁵ The party's participation in elections before 1947 helped train India's political elite. Its dominance in the mid-twentieth century did much to strengthen India's democracy. It generated stability in a period of upheaval and turmoil while also being open to participation at the lowest level.

Both Pakistan and India had a class structure, with powerful landowners pitted against a numerous peasantry, that was not conducive to democratisation. However, in India, the transition to democracy was managed by a compromise between elites. The 1937 elections saw an influx of the more powerful elements in society to the Congress (Manor, 1990, pp. 31–2). However, we are not persuaded by Moore's argument that after 1947 an imperfect form of democracy emerged in India behind which the dominant classes backing the party could avoid substantive economic reform (1967, p. 388). It is possible that an authoritarian outcome would have served the dominant classes equally well. The party's accommodation of these classes was an important stabilising factor during the transition to universal suffrage. It was thus well placed to make the elected and representative aspect of India's liberal democracy function after the enactment of a liberal-democratic constitution in 1950. However, Nehru's progressive ambitions were constrained by the power of landed interests at the state level, many of which were Congressmen.

In addition, the depth of the Congress organisation and its electoral success after independence gave the the party's leadership an exceptional political resource. Its elite enjoyed great influence in the process of drawing up the constitution of

independent India, and its parliamentary majority gave it the freedom to make the 'hard decisions' in the immediate aftermath of decolonisation.

The interaction of structure and agency is demonstrated by the important contribution made by leaders such as Nehru whose deliberate actions steered India away from a more authoritarian outcome (Varshney, 1998). While the agency of this leadership was facilitated by the structural advantages of leading the Congress, the party would also have constrained a departure from the democratic process.

The second explanatory variable we use to explain the democratic transition in India compared with the experiences of Pakistan and Sri Lanka is that of the structure of ethnic diversity in the state. As noted, there is no one defining relationship in terms of the relationship of ethnic heterogeneity to democratisation. Transition theorists have traditionally claimed that, for democratisation to be possible, a shared national identity has to be agreed. Although India is an excellent example of a heterogeneous state that has managed to democratise without a shared national identity, the particular structure of that heterogeneity was important. In 2003, India recognises 18 languages in the constitution, and hundreds more dialects exist. Hindus comprise 83 percent of the population, Muslims 11 percent, Sikhs 2 percent and Christians 2 percent. Rather than being a hindrance to democratisation, Manor argued that this pronounced diversity has strengthened Indian democracy because the multiplicity of identities reduces the potential for 'prolonged and intractable conflict' (1996, p. 463).

Although the Congress did not succeed in effectively representing the Muslim community (one of the factors that led to partition), the enhanced Hindu majority after 1947 was subdivided according to region, language and caste. This social heterogeneity ensured that there was no sizeable ethnic group challenging the status quo and undermining Congress primacy. The demand for the linguistic reorganisation of states was a major challenge to the party. After prolonged agitation, the states were subject to a major reorganisation along linguistic lines in 1956. This is not to argue that the Indian state has always effectively managed ethnic diversity. Linguistic reorganisation has not been a universal panacea for regional tensions – for example, religious concerns were excluded, and, at times, democracy and the legitimacy of the state has been profoundly eroded in Kashmir, Punjab and in parts of the north-east (Bose, 1997; Singh, 1997).

The involvement of the Congress movement in the freedom struggle did much to enhance the influence of its leadership and establish the legitimacy of the organisation among the wider Indian public (Kothari, 1970). But it had done so only by being inclusive. The party became the natural home of Muslims in India outside Kashmir after independence, though events in the 1980s and 1990s undermined its ability to accommodate them successfully.⁶ Its strength and its integration with a broad cross-section of India's heterogeneous society enabled elite actors during the transition to democracy. The cross-cutting nature of social cleavages also strengthened the its leadership. Although the Constituent Assembly debates are replete with heated discussions over the appropriate constitutional forms, the 'oligarchy' who controlled the Assembly and the majority of its committees were determined that a majoritarian parliamentary and centralised federal framework would prevail (Austin, 1966, pp. 188–93). The political elites of both India and

Pakistan worked within the parliamentary federal institutions designed by the British, but the democratic outcome was quite different. This is why the structures of political parties and the structure of ethnic diversity are vital in an explanation of why India managed the transition to democracy and Pakistan did not.

Pakistan

Unlike in India, there was no well-integrated national party in Pakistan able to mediate between the state and society. The Muslim League was a very different organisation to the Congress in India. It remained elite-dominated and only sought to reach out to the masses after its electoral debacle in 1937. This helped to insulate state institutions from democratic forces after decolonisation. In a similar fashion to the Congress, the Muslim League saw itself as the 'national' political party. By definition, it was not as inclusive as the Congress – appealing to the Muslim community in united India. After independence, it did not seek to attract Hindus; indeed, Suhrawardy's attempt to open its membership to Hindus, who comprised 22 percent of Pakistan's population after partition, was rebuffed. However, to claim, as Jaffrelot did (2002, p. 254), that the party was opposed to democracy before independence is too harsh. It sought to temper *majoritarian* democracy within a united India, but this was not surprising given the religious demographics.

In the 1946 elections, rallying under the cry for partition, the Muslim League managed to unite the Muslim community and won 82 percent of the Constituent Assembly seats in the area that became Pakistan. However, unlike the Congress in India, it was not integrated with Pakistani society and fissures soon began to appear. Although the politicians were committed to democracy – one reason why constitution formation was protracted – a transition to democracy did not occur. Can this be attributed to the wider structures of society such as class and the institutions before decolonisation, or did it reflect the absence of a strong agent to promote a democratic transition?

Talbot argued that the structures of the Raj were very different in the areas of north-west India that comprised the core of the Pakistani state and that democratic government came later to this region than the other areas of India (1998, pp. ■■–■■). This is true, but it is problematic to assume that other parts of India experienced meaningful democratic government before 1919 or even 1937. Therefore, the fact that Punjab was only granted a legislative assembly in 1897 is not a decisive explanation. Jaffrelot pointed to the status of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Baluchistan as security buffer zones, which precluded the granting of assemblies, and widened the conclusions by pointing out that Punjab and NWFP formed the core of the Pakistani state (although not comprising the majority of its population at the time of independence) and therefore had the most influence: 'Naturally, their political culture lent more towards keeping order than towards democracy' (2002, pp. 254–5). However, the Punjab had experienced participatory government under the Government of India Acts of 1919 and 1935. Additionally, the leaders of the Muslim League who decamped from the United Provinces in the heartland of India to Pakistan had resided within a province that had experienced 'democratic government' for longer. Of more importance to our

argument is the fact that the British, and later the political parties in the Punjab, were dependent on the landlords – an inherently undemocratic force, according to class-based structuralist theorists of democratisation (Jaffreot, 2002, p. 254; Talbot, 1998, p. 61).

Before partition, the multi-religious Unionist Party dominated the Punjab. However, it failed to put down democratic roots and was dependent on the support of the landlords (Talbot, 1998, p. 68). These landlords switched their allegiance to the Muslim League in the 1946 elections, partially because of its success at mobilising in the urban areas (Waseem, 1994, p. 113). However, the institutionalisation of the party remains an important explanatory variable. Its leaders resided in the United Provinces in India. It was in the Muslim *minority* areas that the demand for Pakistan emerged, *not* in the Muslim majority ones.⁷ When India was partitioned, these leaders migrated to Pakistan. When they did so, the party lost the limited organisational support and social links that it had possessed. The lack of a unified party was a symptom of disunity among the elite. Together with the lack of organisational structure, the Muslim League split rapidly, having little legitimacy.

Although the landlords of Punjab and Sindh remained powerful, as Waseem noted (1994, pp. 113–16), democratisation was hampered by the weakness of the Muslim League within the area that constituted Pakistan. Whereas the Congress in India reached an understanding with the dominant groups in the countryside,⁸ there was no democratic pact between the landlords and the elites of the Muslim League in Pakistan. This was because the party was not an effective organisational force, especially after independence when it shed its urban mobilising wing. It therefore became dependent on the landlords, and this hampered its ability to articulate a cohesive political programme. It quickly broke into factions. In addition, different elites were trying to consolidate their regional position rather than working for national unity. This differed from India, where the regional leaders were accommodated within the Congress system and by linguistic reorganisation.

With regard to our second explanatory variable of the structure of ethnic diversity, Pakistan had five major linguistic groups: Punjabi, Bengali, Sindhi, Baluchi and Pathan speakers, in addition to the newly migrated Urdu speakers from India. These groups were territorially concentrated. This division proscribed the ability of the multiple elites to agree on the nature of the state and a shared national identity. Again, this was related to the nature of the party system. Unlike the Congress in India, which had accommodated linguistic groups within the party, the Muslim League saw linguistic divisions as irrelevant. Linguistic regionalism therefore expressed itself outside the national political party. Regional parties dominated the Muslim majority provinces *before* independence; and because the Muslim League was not an effective national party, they continued to do so after independence. Although national elections were not held until 1970, regional elections held between 1951 and 1954 returned a multiplicity of parties to power.

India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka had the same critical juncture (decolonisation) and were all ethnically diverse, but their ethnic diversity manifested itself in different ways. In addition to the non-integrative nature of the party system, the specific *structure* of ethnic diversity made it harder to effect the transition to democracy in Pakistan. Bengali speakers, the majority of the population (55 percent) and the

largest group by far, were not dominant in the military, the bureaucracy, politics or business. This disjuncture, compounded by the absence of cross-cutting diversity, complicated democratic transition. Punjabi speakers dominated public life and the army. They were unwilling to let the democratic logic progress to its natural conclusion. Real power resided in the hands of a group that would be marginalised in the event of democratisation. We concur with Jaffreot that this was 'an unfavourable configuration for democracy' (2002, p. 256). This is why the process of constitution formation was prolonged – Pakistan's constitution was inaugurated nine years after independence. In that period, because political parties were weak, the other institutions of the state such as the army and the bureaucracy, both dominated by Punjabis, assumed great importance. In contrast to the Congress India, the Muslim League was unable to impose its own version of nation and the state.

Our analysis does not reject the fact that Pakistan's external insecurity, and the need to build the state institutions from scratch, contributed to the problems of democratic transition. The external threat from India strengthened the army. However, the disunity in the political sphere created a vacuum that the army and the bureaucracy were able to fill. Pakistan's critical juncture was a moment of profound institutional weakness. The lack of defined territory and institutions within Pakistan also contributed to the lack of elite consensus. However, the critical juncture was allowed to continue for too long – a function of disagreement among elites caused by the incompatibility of identities, ethnic diversity and lack of an integrative national party. This created the conditions for the army to take over 'in the national interest'. The lack of elite agreement on national unity was a definitive factor in this; however, this lack of agreement was defined and sustained by structural factors.

Sri Lanka

Unlike India, political parties were not well established at the time of decolonisation in 1948. Parties have made an uneven contribution to the establishment of democracy in Sri Lanka. The move to independence was the result of negotiations between the British and members of the political elite, as the nationalist movement, the Ceylon National Congress, was poorly organised. This had two implications. First, the party system was not established at the time of independence. The United National Party (UNP) was formed in 1947, by which point independence was assured, and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) was formed in 1951. Neither party emerged from a strong nationalist movement that was well integrated with society. The parties were formed to extend the ambitions of members of the already existing political elite. Both parties have been troubled by persistent factionalism, and neither is institutionalised in such a way as to be able to restrain their dominant leaders. The upsurge of Buddhist nationalism in the early 1950s put great pressure on the Sinhalese political elite. The lack of effective local party organisation limited the ability of the political elite to contain this anti-Tamil mobilisation. Political elites would have been more effective and able to exert their agency if their parties had been more integrated with Sri Lankan society. Furthermore, the lack of integration of Tamils into the mainstream political parties enabled the elite to ignore their legitimate needs.

The second implication of poorly institutionalised parties is linked to our second explanatory variable – the structure of ethnic diversity. The limited nationalist movement that existed before independence did not manage to generate an inter-ethnic consensus. Party competition was uneven and did not constitute a national party system. Before independence, ethnic tensions existed. The well-educated Tamil elite from the less prosperous north gained white-collar jobs slightly out of proportion to their population strength. This was seen as evidence of discrimination against the Sinhala community, contributing to tensions between the communities (Tambiah, 1986, pp. 65–6). These tensions were reflected in the organisation of political parties. Unlike in India, there was no party that articulated a shared understanding of nationhood that unified Sinhalese and Tamils. In addition, the Tamils were not a homogeneous group. Although all Tamils were historically descended from migrants from India, one group migrated in the pre-colonial period and settled in the north of the island. This group differed from the ‘Indian Tamils’ or ‘Estate Tamils’, who migrated in the nineteenth century under the direction of the colonial administrators to work in the new plantations in the central highlands of Ceylon.

The differences among the Tamil population were demonstrated in 1948 when the Tamil elite of the north acquiesced in the disenfranchisement of the Estate Tamils. Although the transfer of power under the Soulbury Commission did not fully meet Tamil concerns, it did include measures that might have formed the basis of an inter-elite compromise. The constituencies drawn under the terms of the Commission were designed to contain the dominance of the Sinhalese majority and give weighted representation to a range of ethnic groups. However, once the Estate Tamils were disenfranchised, Sinhalese voters dominated the constituencies in which the Estate Tamils were a majority. This radically altered the ethnic balance of the national parliament in favour of the Sinhalese majority. Although the consolidation of Sinhalese power did not create an undemocratic state, it limited the effective operation of democracy.

However, the situation differed from that in Pakistan. In Sri Lanka, a working consensus emerged among the majority community, around a form of exclusionary Sinhalese nationalism. In Pakistan, the Muslim League articulated a version of nationality – based on religion – that was rejected by the majority of the population in both the eastern and western wings. Electoral competition between the Sinhalese UNP and the SLFP has ensured that it is difficult to make concessions to the Tamil minority for fear of being ‘outflanked’ by the other party taking a harder line (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 379–86). Although there have been pre-electoral alliances that have included Tamil political parties, these have not delivered benefits to the Tamil community after the elections. Additionally, the Sinhalese parties do not contest the territorial basis or the unitary character of the state. Basic agreement has been reached within this community on the nature of the state, partially because the Sinhalese constitute 74 percent of the population. This has helped to sustain democracy in the Sinhala part of Sri Lanka, but the institutions of democracy are contested and there is little elite agreement on the ‘rules of the game’. Although Sri Lanka managed the transition to democracy within the core of the state, it has not managed to accommodate the Tamils within a democratic political system. A majoritarian political system operates. In contrast, India, which is also

majoritarian, has a federal system that has facilitated the accommodation of diverse groups and incorporated some differences into the political system. This has not been the case in Sri Lanka, where even the language of the Tamils was downgraded in 1956 when Sinhala was made the official language, severely limiting employment and other opportunities for Tamil speakers.

One account of Sri Lanka's uneven democratisation therefore places emphasis on the fateful decisions made by key leaders at key moments. However, we would argue that this agency has to be situated in the context of important structural forces, especially the importance of ethnic identity in a colonial political economy that was already under stress by 1948. A comprehensive account of Sri Lanka's democratisation needs to emphasise that the disjuncture between political institutions and society contributed to the failings of the political elite. It may have been the case that an elite enabled by integrating institutions, especially parties, would have been better placed to establish an integrated democratic system.

Conclusions

In the countries examined above, it is abundantly clear that elite agency has to be understood in the context of structural conditions that may or may not be favourable to democracy. We have also argued that the range of structures that need to be assessed has to go beyond class and extend to other social and institutional realities. The structure of ethnic diversity and the social integration of political parties are two crucially important variables in the case of South Asia, and it would require effort to test these variables in other regions.

Timing and sequencing of action is also important, as early interventions to define or re-define structures may be very much easier at an earlier stage. Decisive action by elite actors on the question of ethnic relations in Sri Lanka in the early years of the new state may have prevented the later hegemony of majoritarian thinking that defines the negative pattern of party competition between the two main Sinhalese parties and continues to limit the development of democracy.

Political parties can be powerful countervailing institutions that enable elite actors to overcome some of the limitations on democratic transition imposed by the 'ceaseless constraints' of 'social hierarchy' and 'economic need' (Braudel, 1994, p. 27). Parties have played a critical role in the transition to democracy in South Asia. They have extended the reach of democratically inclined elites. However, well-organised parties are a necessary but not sufficient condition for democratisation. It is conceivable that a well-institutionalised party may act as a conduit through which authoritarian rule or undemocratic practices may be propagated.

The structure of ethnic diversity does not dictate a particular democratic outcome. However, a very heterogeneous society may be less conducive to democratic transitions. In such a situation, elite actors may be constrained in their ability to make compromises and are also less likely to do so if they fear exclusion from the institutions of the state. Heterogeneity does not preclude democratisation, as India demonstrates, but transitions to democracy that exclude sizeable proportions of the population from identification with the state such as the Tamils in Sri Lanka and Bengalis in Pakistan are unlikely to be stable. Of course, effective political

institutions, and especially parties, may make the accommodation of ethnic differences possible. However, this accommodation is much more likely to be successful at an earlier stage of the transition process, rather than later when conflicts are institutionalised.

The case of South Asia is an important one for the study of democratisation. The shared colonial legacy and the contrasting democratic outcomes raise intriguing questions within a regional unit well suited to comparative analysis. The success of liberal-democratic institutions in what appears superficially to be an unpromising context commands our attention. Our analysis has shown that, without modifying the dominant approaches to democratisation, it is difficult to explain the different outcomes in the region. We are concerned that the colonial legacy is treated with care. Rather than seeing new elites as trapped in authoritarian traditions (as the pessimists would have it) or as heroic nation-builders unfettered from the colonial regime (as nationalist historians might prefer), we argue for a careful analysis of the loosening of structures and the opportunities for democratic development that were available in the mid-twentieth century.

(Accepted: 22 May 2003)

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Notes

We are grateful to participants at the European Consortium for Political Research conference (Canterbury, September 2001), the British Association of South Asian Studies annual conference (Lancaster, April 2002) and the Network on South Asian Politics and Political Economy meeting (Ann Arbor MI, July 2002), especially Christophe Jaffrelot and Robert Pinkney, as well as three anonymous referees for comments and criticism of earlier drafts of this paper.

- 1 In 1977, Zia-ul-Huq annulled the elections.
- 2 Chadda (2000) drew attention to the limitations of structural and agency-centred approaches but did not explore the possibilities of an alternative approach rooted in a comparison of South Asian cases.
- 3 Although Pakistan and India had the same colonial master and very similar institutions, Talbot (1998) argued that Pakistan's development should be treated separately. After independence, they both possessed a similar number of religious minorities (12 percent), though the linguistic diversity was greater within India and there was no numerically dominant group. Moore's (1967) explanation for India's democratisation emphasises that the diminished power of the landlords after independence because of their estrangement from the nationalist bourgeoisie should also apply to Pakistan. The fact that significant differences emerged points either to the existence of more enduring structures, or to the power of elite agency. Ethnic identities are not necessarily socially constructed, but often their political form is.
- 4 We do not argue that ethnic identities are fixed or necessarily antithetical to one another. Ethnic identities are socially constructed and always situational.
- 5 However, the Congress did not penetrate all the areas of the British Raj. It had little support in the Muslim majority states – with the exception of the North-West Frontier Province. As will be discussed, regional parties were more powerful in these provinces, and the Muslim League did not possess electoral support in these regions before the 1946 elections.
- 6 However, when Indira Gandhi, and then Rajiv, played the Hindu majoritarian card in the 1980s, the Congress lost much of its Muslim support in north India.

- 7 Revisionist theories of partition have persuasively argued that Jinnah sought protection within a united India and that the demand for Pakistan was only a bargaining chip (Jalal, 1985). See Inder Singh (1990) for an opposing view.
- 8 The large estates of the Zamindari landlords were broken up, but more radical proposals for land reform were generally unimplemented.

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