

The Indian election

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EVER since economists began to factor in institutional development as a determinant of economic growth and modernisation, they have begun to emphasise the many links between politics and economics.

The economists' definition of institutions covers a much wider field than commonly believed. Following the work done by Douglass North, the Nobel Prize-winning economist, institutions are seen to mean more than organisations. They also include cultural and social norms and how people interact with one another and also with the organs of the state. It is by looking at the contribution which broadly defined institutions make towards economic and social change that economics and politics begin to overlap.

According to conventional wisdom, India has succeeded in developing its institutional base to the point where it helps rather than hinders its economic and social progress. After more than six decades of allowing institutions to develop to meet the demands of its citizenry, it has reached the stage where it appears that the political, legal and judicial systems have begun to work for the people. This cannot be said either for Bangladesh and Pakistan, countries that together with India constituted the British India empire.

Institutional and political progress in both Pakistan and Bangladesh has been patchy. Often the two countries have taken a step forward only to fall back by two steps. In both countries the military has been a prominent presence in the political landscape. It was sometimes invited by the people through street agitation to stop the countries from plunging into chaos as a consequence of the politicians' inability to resolve their differences by using available institutions. Since Pakistan has a longer history than Bangladesh, military interventions were more frequent there than in the latter.

Why did India succeed while its two neighbours seemed to have failed in developing a durable political structure and a strong institutional base supporting it? What is the probability that India will continue to make progress in this important area, providing a model its South Asian neighbours could follow? Both questions are important. The second question is important at this stage because elections in India are under way. They began on April 16 and will be conducted over a period of five weeks. The elections have already generated a fairly rich commentary in the press on their meaning for India's future, in particular for the development of its political system.

There is a point of view gaining traction both inside and outside India that the prevailing Indian political system may not, after all, be as durable as suggested by conventional wisdom. The strains and stresses that are being brought to bear on the political structure may bring about a deep structural change that will not only affect the country's politics but also its economy. The Indians have come to believe that they are on the verge of becoming an economic superpower. This belief has been reinforced by the way the world has looked at the country's remarkable economic progress over the last of couple of years. But that would need a stable political system.

India has shown a remarkable ability to adapt its political institutions to the changes in the country's social and economic conditions. The Indian constitution is easy to amend and it has frequently changed — in fact hundreds of times — to keep the country's basic law in tune

with changes in circumstances. There have also been changes in practices. Originally the Indians produced a unitary form of government in which most of the power resided with the union government operating out of New Delhi.

However, after the passing of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, who governed the country for 17 years, it was realised that a commanding political figure did not exist who could run a highly centralised system of governance. Accordingly constitutional changes allowed the creation of more states in order to bring government closer to the people. At the same time the Congress party that had dominated India's politics for more than seven decades saw its political base gradually whittled away.

This happened first because of the rise of regional parties, particularly in the country's south, and later by the increasing influence of politics based on caste. Consequently, the Indian political scene is now littered with scores of political parties whose number increases at the time of each election. Neither of the two national parties — Congress and the BJP — is expected to get more than one-third of the 543 seats in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of the Indian parliament. For the last couple of decades, the Indian political landscape has been dominated by “coalition politics”.

There are both pros and cons to this development. The emergence of numerous regional and caste parties has provided a voice to the people, at least during election time. This is why the politics of the street has not been called upon to produce political change as is the case in both Bangladesh and Pakistan. While the multiplication of parties may have brought political stability there is a growing concern in the country that the political system, in the words of a foreign observer of the changing political scene, “is too hamstrung by its diverse parts to agree on a national vision and push through badly needed reforms”.

The elections have given the right to vote to 714 million people. But their choices are likely to further reduce the effectiveness of the political system. The campaign has been light on policy but heavy on communal and caste concerns. Varun Gandhi, a grandson of Indira Gandhi, landed in jail after being caught on tape calling for the massacre of Muslims. The fact that he was punished by the aggressively independent Election Commission and sent to jail speaks volumes for the strength of India's political institutions.

Hindu-Muslim tension is not the only defining moment of the run-up to the elections. Some other communal fissures have also surfaced. A Sikh threw a shoe at a senior member of the cabinet to show his displeasure that Congress had given tickets to two politicians who were accused of inciting riots in 1984 after the assassination of Indira Gandhi by one of her Sikh bodyguards. The reaction to the killing of the prime minister resulted in the deaths of 2,500 people, mostly Sikhs.

In the weeks ahead, I will return to the issues brought to the surface by the elections in India since they have meaning for the rest of South Asia, in particular for Pakistan which is seeing the birth of a new political order. Pakistan has many lessons to learn from the Indian experience.