

## **Pandemic and Civil Space**

Several esteemed databases suggest that Asia will surpass North America and Europe, combined, in global power based on GDP, population size, military spending and technology investment by 2030. South Asia also became the fastest-growing region in the world back in 2016 and has since solidified this position in the last five years. However, when it comes to integration within the states in this region, one can see how far behind South Asia lags. Intra-regional trade in South Asia accounts for only 5% of its total trade, thereby manifesting a glaringly low level of economic bonding in the region. The faltering SAARC process appears to be in limbo since 2016 after India's boycott of the Islamabad Summit. At the beginning of the Covid 19 pandemic high level virtual meetings between heads of state seemed to suggest that this region will work towards combatting the pandemic together. Instead, the region seems to be united in shrinking spaces of civil liberties.

Historically, democratic development has been constrained in South Asia. While India and Sri Lanka etc. have enjoyed electoral democracy since they emerged as sovereign states, civil wars within (and among) countries in the region gave birth to several 'zones of exception' (e.g. Jammu and Kashmir in India). Citizens of other South Asian countries have experienced constitutional monarchies, military dictatorships, and civil wars, along with spells of popular governments. This has resulted in civil society being the target of different regimes across much of the region. Now, coming to the contribution of the COVID-19 pandemic in the civic spaces of South Asia, one can observe the significant shrinkage and contraction of the same in the region.

Quite early into 2020, Doug Rutzen and Nikhil Dutta wrote about how pandemics are fertile breeding grounds for governmental overreach. The outbreak of the global pandemic is reported to have accentuated the surfacing democratic crisis all around the world, affecting as many as 80 countries severely. Some governments have used restrictive measures disingenuously to restrict democratic activities and silence critical voices. It also must be noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has hit the world at a time when a significant number of countries were already moving towards 'restricted civic spaced. Regimes have variously weakened checks and balances, increased state surveillance and imposed censorship.

Almost every country in the region imposed nationwide lockdowns after severe delays. With 40% (which is more than one-third) of the region living in poverty, the imposition of the strict early stages of the lockdown was extremely unwelcomed. India, especially, suffered a large humanitarian emergency with governments denying to take responsibilities for hundreds and thousands of migrant workers in the wake of one of the largest public health crises the country had ever experienced. Women and children, in particular, suffered massively in the entire region with rising domestic violence, abuse, teenage pregnancies and suicides. Confinement within the four walls of their homes also subjected women (and children alike) to molestation and rape. Religious extremism also peaked in the region during the lockdown with governments and citizens constantly blaming each other instead of cooperating in shouldering the responsibilities.

Several studies carried out tend to suggest that political response to the pandemic in South Asia will not so much be a direct and lasting closure of the civic space. Rather, the pandemic, the political response to COVID-19 and the overall socioeconomic consequences tend to aggravate existing conflicts and controversies - with indeterminate outcomes for the evolution of both civic spaces and the overall shape of political regimes.

The proposed webinar will have important civil society activists and academics from Sri Lanka, Nepal, India and Bangladesh to reflect upon the condition of civil liberties and spaces across the region.