



Failure or Functional Anarchy? Understanding Weak/Failing States in South Asia

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According to the latest Failed States Index (FSI), published by the US Fund for Peace, most of the countries in South Asia are in the top 25. In a list topped by Somalia and Sudan, Afghanistan and Pakistan come within the top ten, while Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal come in the top 25.

Are the States in South Asia failing? The parameters identified to rank a failed State in the FSI would apply to South Asia since they achieved independence. Yet one does not see a Somalia or a Sudan like situation. Perhaps, State failure needs different yardsticks in South Asia. This essay aims to raise key questions relating to the concept of failing states in South Asia.

I IS "STATE" COMPLETE IN SOUTH ASIA?

WORK IN PROGRESS

The discourse on failing states should take into account the historical evolution of States, especially when they are compared and ranked. Most of the theories and the indices used to measure State failure start with the basic assumption that the State they are evaluating is a complete "State".

Most of the States in South Asia today are similar to many of the European States during the 18th and 19th centuries. While Europe had the luxury of going through a process of nation building before consolidating into States, most of South Asia has struggling nations and not nation-states. Also, until the 1940s, most of South Asia was colonised by the British and French, and suddenly became independent. Though there was a freedom movement and the involvement native leaders in the political process, it was limited. The use and misuse of the elites in the region by the

colonial rulers and their economic exploitation, was a huge disaster for the subsequent governments. The State in South Asia is still unable to deal with the political legacy of colonial rule. While most of Europe has progressed and have become what they are today, their exploitation of South Asia has left the region where it is today – deeply divided. Most of the inter and intra-state armed conflicts in South Asia owe their origin to colonial rule. If the colonial rulers are to be blamed for handing over a divided polity, the new rulers in most of South Asia did no better. Lack of vision, corruption and failure of governance played a crucial role in the nation building process. Added to these complications is the basic question that faces the rulers in South Asia: what should come first – state building or nation building?

As a result of these complexities, the pace of nation and state building has been neither uniform nor linear. The countries of South Asia have adopted different paces; while the relative political stability in India in the first two decades and the strength of leadership gave it the crucial time to build itself, the lack of both played a major role in undermining both the nation and state building projects in Pakistan. Even regions within a country have adopted different paths to consolidate. For example, in Pakistan, while the Punjab region was able to build and consolidate itself at a faster pace, despite the loss of East Punjab and a huge exodus, other provinces like Sindh and Balochistan are yet to consolidate themselves. India faces similar problems in J&K and the Northeast. Added to this problem is the emergence of a new world order after the Second World War, which divided it into two blocs led by the US and Russia, which played an important role in affecting nation building in South Asia. For example, had the States like Afghanistan and Pakistan been left out of the Cold War strategies of the superpowers, South Asia would have been a different region today.

To conclude, the “State” in South Asia is far from complete. Historical, internal and external factors do play a major role even now in undermining the process of their becoming a complete State. There has to be a “State”, as defined and perceived by the West, if it needs to be judged, whether it is failing or has failed. Some are yet to become a “State” in South Asia. They are still, therefore, a work in progress.

II

ARE UNIVERSAL INDICATORS APPLICABLE?

SOUTH ASIA SUI GENERIS

Theories of State failure and Failing States employ certain parameters to rank States, which is also applied in South Asia. Consider, for example, the indicators used by the FSI; it has three categories – social, economic and political, covering twelve indicators. Amongst the social indicators, it uses the following: demographic pressures; massive movement of Refugees or Internally Displaced Persons; legacy of vengeance-seeking group grievance; and chronic and sustained human flight.

Among the above five social indicators, demographic pressure is something that the State in South Asia has been born with and not created by the State. Movement of refugees and the creation of IDPs are a part of the nation building process. South Asia has been meeting these twin challenges in a remarkable way. None of the States in South Asia are signatory to the UN Convention on Refugees and its follow up protocol. Despite this, the States in South Asia have adequately managed the movement of people – both across their borders and within their borders. After the Indo-Pak partition, East Pakistan crisis, Sri Lanka ethnic problem and Afghan jihad – both India and Pakistan managed to handle the movement of people without much assistance from the outside world.

Even sustained human flight as an indicator of state failure is arguable. Undoubtedly, there has

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been human flight, but this factor should be seen as part of the nation building process. Human flight has taken place for two reasons – search for better economic opportunities and better knowledge opportunities. Today, both have become an asset in South Asia. Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian and Sri Lankan diaspora in North America, Europe and the Gulf has become a major source of income for these countries. Even the flight of knowledge is slowly becoming an asset; growth of cities like Gurgaon, Hyderabad, Bangalore and Chennai as an IT hub at the international level, would not have happened, had there been no human flight in the 1990s, and early part of this decade. Many Indians, who have gone abroad for work, especially in the IT field, are not returning back, creating new resources.

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III

CAN STATE FAIL IN PARTS?

THE ROTTEN REGIONS

Most theories consider State failure in its totality. Despite six decades since independence, the State in South Asia is very diverse in terms of regions, people, development and nation building. Pakistan has only four provinces, but the differences among them are stark as between Punjab and Balochistan. The same is true between the Terai and Kathmandu valley in Nepal; between Dhaka and Chittagong in Bangladesh; and between Colombo and Jaffna in Sri Lanka. India, in particular, is almost a continent with different sub regions, cultures, history and political development.

While some regions within the State may have developed, others have lagged behind due to historical, geographical, governance and leadership problems. While India, which occupies a high position in the FSI index, may not be a cause for concern, parts of India are unstable. For example, as the Prime Minister has admitted, left wing extremism, which is widespread in three states –Chatisgarh, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh, is a major security threat for India. J&K, especially the Kashmir Valley, and India’s northeast, especially Assam and Nagaland are in deep trouble. Most of the parameters used for State failure would fit these regions in India, though in the overall, it would appear stable.

On the other hand, a State which ranks high in State failure, may be not be a total failure, but only failing in parts. For example, Pakistan ranks very high in the FSI. A deeper analysis of the situation in Pakistan would reveal that Sindh and Punjab are relatively stable and the problem is restricted to the FATA and NWFP. However, the violence in FATA and NWFP is so high that it conveys the impression that the entire country is in flames. If one analyses the total number of districts in Pakistan affected by violence, then one would appreciate that most of its districts are stable. Any discourse on State failure should take into account the regional aspect, and its overall implications on stability and security.

Second, the success or failure of the State should not be perceived through an overall regional prism, but through different segments constituting stability – social, political and economic. A state may be politically stable, but economically bad and vice-versa. Pakistan during 1996-98, under Nawaz Sharif was politically stable, but economically unstable, while Gujarat under Narendra Modi may be economically sound, but socially highly divided and even unstable.

Third, especially in the South Asian context, the center-provincial relations should also be considered, where the regions are ruled by different governments belonging to different parties, with varying ideologies. NWFP under the MMA government is totally different from Punjab under the PML, during the same period 2002-08. Thus, at the national level there may be a government with a secular and moderate policy, while at the provincial level, there may be totally a different government pursuing in the opposite direction. As explained above, there may be a difference between two provinces having a common border, in terms of their policies and strategies, which result in stabilizing or destabilizing the region, especially in social and economic spheres.

IV

CAN STATE FAIL IN CYCLES? THE STABILITY-INSTABILITY CURVE

An important issue in defining a State as a success or failure is the discourse on its historical evolution. In South Asia, some States have pursued the path of being stable and unstable in a cyclical fashion. Pakistan, in particular has pursued the path of stability and instability in the same decade. Invariably, during the second part of every decade, instability slowly creeps and reaches its

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peak towards the seventh, eighth and ninth years. What is equally surprising, is that during every decade, Pakistan has bounced back from either a political or economic disaster into a relatively stable situation. Pakistan was highly unstable between 1947-49, 57-59, 68-71, 78-80, 87-89, 98-2001 and now since 2007. However, Pakistan was relatively stable in 1972-77, 82-86, 89-97 and 2001-06.

The same is true of Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Nepal's political path in the last two decades has followed a rollercoaster pattern like Pakistan. From a monarchy in the 1980s into a Parliamentary government to Maoist violence to the present political setup, Nepal has witness alternate periods of stability and instability. One can map the same stability-instability curve in Bangladesh since it became independent in 1971. Even in India, parts of it were highly unstable, but bounced back. Anti-Hindi and separatist sentiments were predominant in Tamil Nadu during the 1960s and Punjab witnessed a serious militancy in the 1980s; today, both states are stable. J&K was stable until the late 1980s, became highly unstable in the 1990s and has remained so until recently. Numerous internal and external factors play a significant role in determining this stability-instability curve of the state in South Asia.

IV

ARE STATE FAILURE, ABSENCE OF STATE & BREAKDOWN OF GOVERNANCE SYNONYMOUS? SHADES OF FAILURE

Stability and failure are not simple concepts in South Asia. One can see shades of success and failure; they differ between South Asia and the sub-Saharan Africa; even within these two regions there are remarkable differences. For example, in certain parts of Sri Lanka, until recently, the State did not exist. For the last two decades parts of northern Sri Lanka were under the control of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The State could not enter this region, and the LTTE controlled it like a separate State. The Maoists ran a parallel government in parts of Nepal, until the confrontation came ended in 2007-08. Parts of

FATA, especially North and South Waziristan are now under the control of the Taliban. The State will have to launch a major military operation to bring these regions under its control. The State has completely failed in these regions, and they are signs of a total State failure.

Second, in parts of the country, the State has not failed, but is absent in terms of institutions and delivery mechanisms. People are left to take care of their own essential needs. In most of the Naxal affected areas the State is missing, but it has not completely failed. The absence of the State from these regions has not resulted in the presence of another entity which is running another government. Though the Naxals have influence in these regions, they cannot be compared to the LTTE or TTP in FATA. The State has not failed here, as explained earlier, but is only absent.

Third, in parts of the country, the State may not have completely failed or been absent, but its governance processes are extremely feeble. These areas are very much under the control of the State, its machinery intact – like the institutions and delivery mechanisms. However, they do not function. For example, public health institutions in many parts of India do not function; in rural areas, there are primary health centers and hospitals, with proper buildings and ambulances. But the ambulances do not ply since the drivers never come to work; or the hospitals do not function, for doctors do not attend. Numerous schools in Pakistan have become ghost schools, as the teachers turn up only on the first day of the month to collect their salaries. Corruption and bureaucratic delays play an important role in undermining institutions and delivery mechanisms. In these cases, the State is neither absent, nor controlled by other actors; but there is a total failure of governance. Unfortunately, most of South Asia is reeling under the failure of governance.

IV

DEFAULT OR BY DESIGN?

UNDERSTANDING THE FAILURE STRATEGY

While in parts of South Asia, the State does not exist by default, in other parts it does not exist due to deliberate design by the State. For example in FATA, the State did not want its writ to run, since it believed this was a better strategy to deal with the Pashtun tribes settled along the Durand line. While the NWFP, bordering the FATA, is under the control of Pakistan in terms of mainstream political, administrative and judicial systems, the State in

Pakistan has purposely let the FATA be governed by tribal codes and customs, loosely defined as Pashtunwali. The Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) and the Political Agents do exist in FATA, but they are more a symbolic presence. Even today, the strategy of the State in Islamabad is to let the Taliban take over parts of FATA and Swat, as part of a deliberate design, to gain strategic depth in Afghanistan. Many in Balochistan, especially the nationalists and militants accuse the State in Pakistan, for undermining the social and economic conditions of the Balochi people. They rationalize that the gas and Gwadar port in Balochistan is too important to remain with the Balochis; hence the State, dominated by the Punjabis, keep the Balochis under-developed and ensure they are unaware of their rights.

Until recently, India did not develop its border regions, especially in J&K and Arunachal Pradesh. In particular the infrastructure in these two regions, in terms of roads and bridges was not developed. since India feared that these roads and bridges would facilitate Chinese intrusions into India in a military confrontation with China.

IV

A FUNCTIONAL ANARCHY?

DEFINING THE STATE OF CHAOS & CHAOS OF STATE

Clearly, South Asia is Sui Generis. All States in South Asia are still in different phases of nation and state building. While India, is relatively more stable than other countries in the regions, parts of it are plagued by the same problems visible in the neighbourhood. As a region, South Asia has faced crisis after crisis, failed in parts and in cycles, yet bounced back every time. The State in South Asia seems to be anarchical at most times, but remains functional. Further research is essential to understand these questions from a South Asian perspective.

Perhaps the State in South Asia needs a new theory – Functional Anarchy.



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