

NARRATING DEMOCRACY IN THE COMMONWEALTH: AN OVERVIEW

Mel Bunce and Elizabeth Chatterjee¹

The trajectories of democracy in the Commonwealth have been as diverse as its membership. Over the past 60 years, member states have witnessed both the expansion of franchise and civil liberties, and the bloody violence of military coups and authoritarianism. Despite this range of experiences, a number of broad trends are discernible. This review essay briefly sketches some of the more notable developments in the biography of Commonwealth democracy, and identifies some key variables that help to explain the diversity of member states' experience.² Our overview covers three main areas: 1. the colonial period and its legacy; 2. the widely divergent trajectories taken by states in the decades after formal decolonisation; and 3. a renewed upsurge of democracy, post-national and even post-state forms of governance in the contemporary era. Evidence from the Commonwealth supports recent observations that economic development alone does not lead to strong democracies (Acemoglu et al 2005; Rigobon and Rodrik 2005); this review demonstrates that political culture and civil society institutions play a central role in democratic solidification.

Although there is a rich and lively debate on the definition of the term, most contemporary observers agree that the minimum features of democracy include government based on a majority rule and the consent of the governed; the existence of free and fair elections; the protection of minorities; and respect for basic human rights (Kekic 2007; see also Dahl 1971). This 'thin' definition is sometimes referred to as procedural, liberal democracy. A fuller definition, 'substantive democracy', suggests that, in addition to a formal vote and basic rights, citizens should have *meaningful* and

¹ Mel Bunce is a Round Table Commonwealth Young Scholar and reading for a DPhil in Politics at the University of Oxford. Elizabeth Chatterjee is an Examination Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford.

² The Commonwealth as a grouping (as opposed to an institution) has been rather neglected by academics since at least the 1970s (c.f. Brady 1954). This forum is evidently not the one for a systematic appraisal of all fifty-four (now fifty-three) states; our contribution is intended to be provocative rather than comprehensive. Given the existing disproportionate influence of developmental-economic literature, this review instead unabashedly takes politics rather than economics as its core.

equal representation in government, such that election outcomes accurately reflect the wishes of the citizenry. For this to occur - if indeed, it is possible - societies must exhibit high levels of social and economic equality, without which privileged citizens wield disproportionate power (eg Shapiro 1997).

A passing glance at the Democracy Index compiled by the *Economist's* Intelligence Unit Index of Democracy reveals the full diversity of democratic permutations found within the contemporary Commonwealth (Kekic 2007). This index examines the state of democracy in 167 countries, along five variables: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, functioning of government, political participation and political culture. Commonwealth countries in the 2008 index range from the 'Full Democracy' of New Zealand, ranked the seventh most democratic nation in the world (with a score of 9.19 out of 10) down to the absolute monarchy of Swaziland, ranked 137 (with a score of 3.04); the remainder are widely spread throughout the index.

Among this diversity, three loose categories of democratic countries can be discerned. British Westminster democracy was successfully exported to the former white-settler Dominions of Australia, New Zealand and Canada, who have experienced stable, transparent and increasingly substantive democracy. A second, middle category of countries, most notably India, Sri Lanka and the Caribbean nations, have experienced stable but troubled democratic processes. Elections have typically - but not always - been fairly freely fought, with high voter turnout, and political parties tend to serve their full term in office (Griffin 1993). However, these democratic systems have been troubled by trends towards authoritarian centralisation and corruption, and sometimes high levels of political violence. A third group have deeply unstable democratic systems - or, facing multiple coups d'état, authoritarianism or an overmighty military - no democracy to speak of. . This category has included Pakistan, Bangladesh, Fiji, and a range of states in Africa, such as Swaziland, Cameroon, Nigeria, Malawi, Uganda and Sierra Leone. In several of these, democratic civilian rule appears to be less the norm than an experimental aberration.

What explains the divergent development of these nations' political systems? Nominally these countries inherited similar Westminster-style political institutions and a British legal system, police forces and civil service processes. For most, independence from Britain was predicated on the staging of a democratic election. Yet very quickly, the new nations were treading profoundly different paths. The following section suggests some important variables in the colonial legacy which influenced these divergent trajectories, while section two addresses their post-independent development.

I THE COLONIAL LEGACY

The form and duration of British colonialism played a significant role in shaping subsequent administrative systems. Four factors were particularly important: the instillation of liberal-democratic values; administrative and military legacies; and the cultural/ethnic lines drawn and entrenched during the colonial era. Variations in this legacy foreshadowed the path and narrative that independence movements - the inheritors of the state - would choose to follow.

Liberal-democratic values. Despite the fundamentally illiberal nature of imperial rule, British colonialism often provided the intellectual resources and ideology of political liberalism and democracy. In India and the Caribbean, British rulers had long engaged local leaders in democratic governance; elections were introduced prior to independence, and nationalist parties were permitted an important role in negotiations over the evolution of government; these precedents encouraged faith in the inherited system (Griffin 1993). This contrasted with the pell-mell decolonisation of British Africa where democracy was hastily introduced, its values were not internalised, and leaders such as Tanzania's Julius Nyerere and Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda could turn away from multi-partyism as a colonial import.

Political order and administrative legacy. India and the Caribbean island nations inherited relatively centralised states and strong, well-functioning civil services. With state power well-organised and clearly located in the centre, the transition to

democratic governance was relatively smooth (Jalal 1995; Kohli 2001; Griffin 1993). This contrasted with newly-independent Bangladesh where there was no tradition of professional, politically neutral administrators, and newly appointed bureaucrats resorted to corruption and clientelistic patronage relationships (van Schendel 2009). In much of British Africa, where the imperial rulers had followed an ethos of indirect rule, administration was ad hoc, the rule of law often sporadic and power dispersed (Mamdani 1999). Upon independence, this administrative vacuum was often filled by demagogic leadership, opportunistic plunderers or the military.

Military legacy Coercion had provided the glue of the British Empire, and the military continued to play an important role in post-colonial nations, at times threatening nascent democracies. Newly empowered military groups often espoused colonial-era ideas of paternalistic authoritarianism in the name of stability. In Pakistan this tendency was particularly pronounced, given Punjab's role as the Raj's garrison and the new nation's anti-Indian identity (van Schendel 2009: 194). Similar fears about protecting the new nation from instability and internal and external enemies were also used to justify praetorian interventions in nations including Nigeria, Uganda, Lesotho, Ghana and Bangladesh.

Heterogeneity and conflict Many of the new Commonwealth nations did not enjoy Britain's relative homogeneity and small size, and several had been artificially created to include conflicting and newly hardened group identities. In some nations, slavery or indentured labour had added whole new ethnic groups to the body politic. Tribal, religious and ethnic groupings were manipulated by colonial administrators, creating divisions that inform and problematise democratic practices to this day (Berman 1998; Iliffe 1979) as in Fiji, Kenya, Cameroon and Sri Lanka, to name only a few.

Britain's older colonies had the advantage of well established administrations, sometimes an extant tradition of elections, and often enjoyed relative homogeneity; whilst the African colonies generally did not. Nonetheless, the colonial inheritance was not the sole determinant of the countries' future political development, despite the claims of neocolonialist historiography (Nugent 2004). The role of new national

identities, charismatic leaders and economic growth was also crucial. How leaders chose to negotiate the legacy of colonialism varied greatly.

II POST-INDEPENDENCE TRAJECTORIES

This section traces the post-independence democratic trajectories of three loose categories of Commonwealth nations: the transparent, established democracies of the former white dominions; the mixed or troubled democracies of India and the Caribbean; and the authoritarian and often failed democracies of Bangladesh, Pakistan, Fiji and many regimes in British Africa.

1. Democratic Dominions

In the white-settler dominion colonies of Australia, New Zealand and Canada, the British parliamentary system was smoothly transferred from metropolis to peripheries. Colony leaders and settlers, socialised in British liberal traditions, simply assumed that power would be democratically administered. At independence, these dominions established a Westminster parliamentary system, with bicameral houses (the upper house was later abolished in New Zealand), a ministerial executive cabinet, and the British monarchy as the nominal head of state. Small changes were made to this model, reflecting local geographies, demographics and experiences, but the substantive components were never challenged.³

After independence, democracy in the dominions expanded along a liberal progressive trajectory. Universal suffrage was gradually introduced from the trail-blazing adoption of women's suffrage in New Zealand in 1893, through to the relatively late granting of voting rights for First Nations in Canada (1960) and Australian Aborigines (1962); civil liberties codified and defended; and minorities protected. These countries also made

³ In Australia, for example, the founders incorporated American innovations – a powerful, elected upper house (able to overrule the lower house) and a written constitution – leading some historians to dub it the ‘Westminster mutation’ (Thompson 1980). Other notable differences include compulsory, preferential voting in Australia and a mixed-member proportional representation system of voting in New Zealand.

moves towards more substantive democracy through the introduction of the welfare state and an emphasis on closing gaps between rich and poor, although meaningful democracy was arguably weakened by the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s (Roper 2005).

Of the three nations, Canada's path to a unified, democratic state was the most complex. Her ten provinces entered the Confederacy gradually; and the dual colonial inheritance from France and Britain prompted a strong separatist movement in Quebec, not formally resolved until an (extremely close) referendum in 1995. These regional tensions illustrate the potentially destabilizing influence of cultural heterogeneity, regardless of economic or developmental status. Canada was able to accommodate Quebec through a devolution of powers, economic incentives, and representation in federal government. Countries that did not employ accommodative politics would face greater threats to their stability.

2. Rocky transitions: accommodation and conflict in India and the Caribbean

The Anglophone Caribbean has stood out in the developing world for its virtual absence of military challenges to civilian democratic control (Sutton 1999). This success owes much to three centuries of British colonial rule, which left an enduring cultural and economic legacy, a strong civil service and rule of law (Griffin 1993: 84). However, non-Colonial factors were also very important: the small population and size of many of these islands increased political cohesion (Peters 1992); the early emergence of political parties and labour unions paved the way for middle and lower class politicians to emerge; while impressive economic growth supported democratisation by fostering high levels of literacy. Some tensions do, however, remain under the surface. Political violence has flared up at times, as in Jamaica in the 1970s and Guyana after the Jonestown massacre, and high levels of cultural intolerance to minorities like homosexuals undermine any pretense of substantive democracy in some Caribbean nations (LAPOP 2006).

India has been superficially the most surprising success story of post-colonial democratisation: despite its size, diversity, poverty and high illiteracy rates, it has remained democratic bar Indira Gandhi's Emergency (1975-77). As in Canada, a foundational plank of this success came from the adaptation of the Westminster system to include a federal component, and especially the successful accommodation of centripetal linguistic-regionalist pressures in the States Reorganisation Act of 1956.⁴ India has largely managed to contain the immense fragmentary pressure of its charged identity politics. However, its electoral democracy is founded upon serious repression against some elements of its citizenry: the Indian state has killed an estimated 100,000 of its own people since independence (Guha 2007). Nor is the state's control of its territory wholly assured: a quarter of India's rural districts currently face some threat from Maoist 'Naxalite' insurgents; state penetration of the countryside remained limited for decades; and riots and aggressive communalism are resilient features of the political scene. In addition, the administration has sometimes succumbed to the criminalisation of politics and state activity. India has been labelled a paradoxical 'weak-strong state' (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987) and its democratic progress criticised (Corbridge and Harriss 2000).

3. Authoritarianism and upheaval: contested and captured states

In a number of Commonwealth members, even the veneer of democracy - a formal vote, and the choice between political practices - has been largely absent. Attempts at democratic processes have been threatened by growth-destroying corruption, violent ethnic division, multiple coups, military rule and the breakdown of authority over sections of their populations. Rather than democracy, many of these regimes have developed 'totalistic' systems: top-down, authoritarian states, distinct from society (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987).

Following independence, the state was vulnerable to capture in two theoretically different (but practically quite similar) fashions. On one hand, visionary nationalist

⁴ Conversely, New Delhi was later damaged by its turn to illiberal interventionism in Kashmir and Punjab, prompting the realisation that strategies of accommodation were far more successful in containing opposition than commandant interventions (Manor 2001).

rulers found it very difficult to resist the temptation to use state resources to suppress dissent in the name of national unity, as in the *de facto* or *de jure* one-party (or 'no-party') systems of Mugabe's Zimbabwe, Jerry Rawling's Ghana and Museveni's Uganda before 2005. In this they were supported by the academic orthodoxy that the short-term thinking fostered by electoral democracy was inappropriate for developing countries facing enormous challenges (e.g. Callaghy 1994); in Nyerere's socialistic Tanzania, impatience with the slow pace of development led to increasing coercion.

On the other hand was the near-naked pursuit of individual and group self-enrichment by state plunder, as in Paul Biya's heavily corrupt Cameroon and Jomo Kenyatta's Kikuyu-favouring Kenya. Given the rewards brought by control of state apparatus and resources, bloody internecine struggles have been prone to erupt, as in the Kenyan election violence of 2007-8 and protests in Cameroon. These regimes - guardedly praised for their relative stability - have sustained themselves using combinations of repression, election fraud and wholesale bribery beneath a veneer of democratic rule.

In some cases, state sovereignty has been violently rejected by peripheral groups, as in the Nigerian civil war of 1967-70. More commonly, civilian regimes have been thoroughly discredited by electoral fraud, corruption, economic marginalisation and lack of popular legitimacy, as in the lead-up to the Sierra Leonean civil war. Charismatic leaders often struggled to translate their authority into a rational structure independent of their own personality. By resorting to autocracy, they risked creating an unstable personalistic culture of patronage and clientelism, or made themselves authoritarian targets for coups, as in the case of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Bangladesh) and Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana). Where precarious civilian regimes have arisen, the military has intervened time and time again, as in Pakistan, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Lesotho and Fiji. Unfortunately these regimes have performed no better than the weak civilian ones they replaced.

In this third group, there is a fundamental lack of congruency between state and nation which disproportionately favours some citizens - and has undermined the state's claim to a monopoly of legitimate violence. At best, human rights are neglected, civil liberties

repressed and political violence and corruption are endemic; at worst, civilian regimes have collapsed into bloody anarchy and venal praetorian regimes emerged in their place.

III DEMOCRATIC REVIVAL AND POST-STATE FORMS OF DEMOCRACY IN THE CONTEMPORARY COMMONWEALTH

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, some of the most authoritarian states in the Commonwealth began to experiment with democratic reforms. Africa, in particular, was characterised by a general trend towards plural politics and multiparty election competition at this time (Legum 1990; Joseph 1991). Wiseman describes “a fundamental change of balance in the nature of political pluralism: from private to public, covert to overt, unofficial to official, and informal to formal” (1993: 440). Many former Commonwealth nations held multiparty elections, including Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda; post-9/11 Pakistan was also forced grudgingly back towards democracy, although its military remained powerful.

Two main factors may account for this change. Firstly, the once-lauded African socialist republics (Tanzania, Zambia and Ghana) had failed to sustain economic or social development, and were under increased pressure from internal discontent (Nugent 2004). The ideal-typical authoritarian developmental state thus appeared anachronistic and inefficient (Robinson and White 1998). Nor had many of their corrupt capitalist equivalents fared much better: Kenya had plunged from being a middle-income country at independence to one of the world's poorest. Secondly, with the end of the Cold War, the international community became less willing to turn a blind eye to the undemocratic regimes of former allies. A new consensus emerged that democracy was possible in poor as well as rich countries, even if economic development contributes to the resilience of democracy (Huntington 1991; Bratton and van der Walle 1997). Aid donors and international actors like the United Nations and International Monetary Fund began to make aid contingent on democratic reform. In 1991, the Commonwealth Secretariat restated its commitment to democratic governance in the Harare Declaration, which

belatedly emphasised that it would no longer tolerate undemocratic regimes within its membership. At Millbrook in 1995, procedures were finally developed for suspending non-democratic states, the crucial 'coercive' element missing from the 1971 Singapore Declaration. Subsequently, Nigeria, Pakistan, Fiji and Zimbabwe would famously be suspended, although the latter snubbed the organisation by leaving in 2003.

Whether or not this re-emergent pluralism will lead to the development of more genuinely democratic political systems is a problematic, and longer-term, question. The new pluralism might be regarded as a necessary but insufficient condition for the creation of political democracy (Weisman 1993).

The decline of the state?

Complicating the equation further, the post-Cold War era has witnessed an explosion of civil-society actors, transnational and multilateral organisations, that draw attention away from the state, and saw the rise of innovative and more nebulous forms of democracy across an increasingly interdependent globe. In both the developed and developing world, the unitary, omnipresent state is being rejected in favour of a more pared-down state whose functions are disaggregated to civil-society actors and markets (Chandhoke 2003).

Civil society strengthens democracy by widening participation, protecting citizens and helping to guarantee political accountability (Blair 1993, Bratton 1994, Diamond 1994). However markets and civil society organisations are less democratically accountable than governmental organisations; and the liberalised state may provide more rather than fewer opportunities for siphoning off state funds (Jenkins 1999). Moreover, the democratic upsurge, which has seen increasing numbers of poorer and low-status people involved in politics, contains a paradox. Whilst in much of Africa and South Asia poorer people are more likely to vote (Yadav 2000), they are also more likely to be dissatisfied with the government and to resort to grassroots, non-traditional forms of organisation – including riots, strikes and violence – which undermine formal electoral politics and their own states (Bratton 2006). The 'rise of civil society' may promise much

for Commonwealth members, but its evolution and legacy are currently difficult to predict.

CONCLUSION

The colonial-era played an important role in the subsequent solidification or rejection of democratic systems around the Commonwealth. However, this legacy interacted with unique local sociopolitical cultures, demographics and economic circumstances to inform the models and development of democratic regimes. Key among these factors was how new leader chose to accommodate ethnic and cultural divisions within their state.

This brief sketch cannot, of course, come close to capturing the sheer range and diversity of democratic developments that have taken place around the Commonwealth over the past sixty years. Indeed, the value of analyzing these countries as a group, and creating typographical interpretations, is limited and will inevitably be debated by other contributors. Many countries remain difficult to classify: South Africa, for example, after decades of controversial apartheid rule - equivalent to an extended, heavily racialised colonialism - held its first universal election in 1994 and the country's democracy has performed precociously well ever since.

The overall fate of democracy among the Commonwealth members has been troubled and patchy, marked less by world-historical convergence than experiments and failures. A recent democratic upsurge, and the emergence of civil society actors, has suggested the future may exhibit more dispersed forms of power - forms that are both more and less accountable to citizens. But it remains up to member states whether these new forces will be rejected or incorporated into state governance. Sixty years after the unraveling of the British Empire formally began, Commonwealth nations hold their individual fates in their own hands.

References Cited

- Acemoglu, Daron, Simon Johnson, James Robinson and Pierre Yared (2005) 'Income and Democracy.' *NBER Working Paper* No. 11205.
- Berman, Bruce J. (1998) 'Ethnicity, patronage and the African state: the politics of uncivil nationalism.' *African Affairs* 97, pp. 305-341.
- Blair, Harry (1993) "Civil Society and Democratic Development: A CDIE Evaluation Paper." Washington: USAID, POL/CDIE/E/POA, November 9.
- Brady, Alexander (1953) 'Nationalism and democracy in the British Commonwealth: some general trends.' *American Political Science Review* 47:4, pp. 1029-1040.
- Bratton, Michael (1994) 'Civil Society and Political Transition in Africa' *Institute for Development Reports*, 11:6.
- _____ (2006) 'Poor people and democratic citizenship in Africa.' Afrobarometer Working Paper No. 56.
- Bratton, Michael and Nicolas van der Walle (1997) *Democratic experiments in Africa: regime transitions in comparative perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Callaghy, Thomas M. (1994) 'Africa: back to the future?' *Journal of Democracy* 5:4, pp. 133-45.
- Chandhoke, Neera (2003) 'Governance and the pluralisation of the state.' *Economic and Political Weekly* 38:28, pp. 2957-2968.
- Corbridge, Stuart and John Harriss (2000) *Reinventing India: liberalization, Hindu nationalism and popular democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Dahl, Robert (1971) *Polyarchy: participation and opposition*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Diamond, Larry (1994) 'Toward Democratic Consolidation' *Journal of Democracy* 5:3, pp. 4-17.
- Griffin, Clifford (1993) 'Democracy in the Commonwealth Caribbean.' *Journal of Democracy* 4:2, pp. 84-94.
- Guha, Ramachandra (2007) *India after Gandhi: the history of the world's largest democracy*. London: Macmillan.

- Huntington, Samuel (1968) *Political order in changing societies*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press.
- _____ (1991) *The third wave: democratization in the late twentieth century*. Norman; London: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Iiffe, John (1979) *A modern history of Tanganyika*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jalal, Ayesha (1995) *Democracy and authoritarianism in South Asia: a comparative and historical perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jenkins, Rob (1999) *Democratic politics and economic reform in India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Joseph, Richard (1991) 'Africa: the rebirth of political freedom', *Journal of Democracy* 2:4, pp 11-24.
- Kekic, Laza (2007) 'The Economist Intelligence Unit's index of democracy.' *The World in 2007*. London: Economist Newspaper Limited.
- Kohli, Atul (2001) 'Introduction.' In Atul Kohli (ed.) *The success of India's democracy*, pp. 1-19. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LAPOP (2006) The AmericasBarometer by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), www.LapopSurveys.org.
- Legum, Colin (1990) 'The coming of Africa's second independence', *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter pp 129-140
- Madden, A. F. (1979) "Not for export": The Westminster model of government and British colonial practice.' *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 8:1, pp. 10 – 29
- Mahmood, Mamdani (1999) 'Historicizing power and responses to power: Indirect rule and its reform' *Social Research* 66:3, pp. 859 - 886.
- Manor, James (2001) 'Center-state relations.' In Atul Kohli (ed.) *The success of India's democracy*, pp. 78-102. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nugent, Paul (2004) *Africa since independence: a comparative history*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Peters, Donald (1992) *The Deomocratic system in the East Carribbean*. Westport: Greenwood Press.

- Rigobon, Roberto and Dani Rodrik (2005) 'Rule of law, democracy, openness and income: estimating the interrelationships.' *Economics of Transition* 13:3, pp. 533-64.
- Robinson, Mark and Gordon White (eds.) (1998) *The democratic developmental state: politics and institutional design*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Roper, Brian (2005) 'Globalisation and the shift in policy making from Keynesianism to Neoliberalism: the decline of National State Authority' in Patman, Robert and Chris Rudd (eds) *Sovereignty Under Seige? Globalisation and New Zealand*, pp. 23-37. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Rudolph, Lloyd I. and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph (1987) *In pursuit of Lakshmi: the political economy of the Indian state*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press.
- Shapiro, Ian (1997) 'Components of the Democratic Ideal' in Breton, Albert, Pierre Salmon and Ronald Wintrobe (eds) *Understanding Democracy: Economic and Political Perspectives*, pp. 211 - 248.
- Sutton, Paul (1999) "Democracy in the Commonwealth Caribbean" *Democratization* 6:1, pp. 67-8
- Thompson, Elaine (1980) 'The "Washminster" mutation.' *Australian Journal of Political Science* 15:2, pp. 32-40.
- Van Schendel, Willem (2009) *A history of Bangladesh*. Cambridge: Cambridge University.
- Wiseman, John A.(1993) 'Democracy and the new political pluralism in Africa: Causes, consequences and significance', *Third World Quarterly* 14: 3, pp. 439—449.
- Yadav, Yogendra (2000) 'Understanding the second democratic upsurge: trends of Bahujan participation in electoral politics in the 1990s.' In Francine Frankel, Zoya Hasan, Rajeev Bhargava and Balveer Arora (eds.), *Transforming India: social and political dynamics of democracy*, pp. 120-145. Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press.