



From Institutional Stability To Economic Progress: *A Comparative Study of Electoral Governance in 'Viksit Bharat' vs. Bangladesh and Pakistan.*



Introduction: The Democratic Trajectory and Political Stability of South Asia:

Despite geographical proximity and a shared British colonial legacy, the three major South Asian states—India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan—display significant diversity in their political evolution and electoral systems. Following the end of British rule in 1947, two independent states, India and Pakistan, emerged, and later in 1971, Bangladesh was born out of Pakistan. Although all three countries began their journeys with the aspiration of Westminster-style parliamentary democracy, over the span of eight decades India's democratic stability—contrasted with political uncertainty in Bangladesh and Pakistan—has become a major subject of global political research.

Background

Political stability is the fundamental basis of a country's economic and social development, and it is ensured through a transparent and credible electoral system. For the past 75 years, India has consistently held elections and established itself as the “world's largest democracy”. In contrast, Pakistan has spent nearly half of its history under military rule, where civilian governments have always functioned under the shadow of the “establishment” or the military. Bangladesh presents yet another distinct picture: democracy here has risen and fallen at times through anti-autocratic movements, and at other times through the experimental application of an innovative governance system known as the “caretaker government.”

Problem and Significance

In the contemporary world, the increasingly popular concept of “Developed India” (Viksit Bharat) is rooted in long-term political continuity. However, in Bangladesh and Pakistan, the negative culture of political defection, electoral manipulation, and the weakness of constitutional institutions have hindered long-term development. In particular, it is crucial to analyse how Article 70 of the Constitution of Bangladesh and the phenomenon of “lotaism” (political defection) in Pakistan have shaped and differentiated the political trajectories of these three countries.

Objectives

The main objectives of this research paper are:

- i. To conduct a comparative analysis of the evolution and current structures of the electoral systems in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.
- ii. To examine the impact of anti-defection laws and their consequences for the stability of parliamentary democracy.
- iii. To investigate how electoral transparency has contributed to India’s economic rise and why it has become a challenge in the cases of Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Method

This study is primarily a qualitative and comparative analysis. Primary and secondary sources include the constitutions of the three countries, reports of their election commissions, data from international observer organizations (such as IDEA and Transparency International), and research works by prominent political scientists like Christophe Jaffrelot and Rounaq Jahan.

Comparative Structure of Electoral Systems:

In examining the electoral systems of these three South Asian countries, three key dimensions must be considered: **electoral governance**, **constitutional independence**, and **voting technology**. Although all three countries follow the *First-Past-The-Post* (FPTP) system—where the candidate receiving the highest number of votes wins—there are substantial differences in how this system is administered.

Under **Article 324 of the Indian Constitution**, the *Election Commission of India (ECI)* is recognized as one of the strongest electoral institutions in the world. It is a permanent constitutional body. The process for removing the Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners is as complex as that for judges of the Supreme Court, which helps ensure their independence from political influence. Once the election schedule is announced, the entire civil administration and law-enforcement agencies come under the authority of the Commission, and the government loses its policy-making powers during this period. India transitioned from paper ballots to *Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs)* nationwide in the 2004 general election, and later introduced the *Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT)* system. These technologies have played a revolutionary role in speeding up elections and preventing electoral fraud.

The **Constitution of Bangladesh**, in Articles 118 to 126, outlines provisions related to elections. Over the past five decades, Bangladesh’s electoral framework has undergone several fundamental transformations. In 1996, the *13th Constitutional Amendment* introduced a non-party caretaker government system, which was a unique innovation in the country’s electoral history. However, this system was abolished in 2011 through the *15th Constitutional Amendment*. At present, elections are held under incumbent party governments. Although the *Election Commission (EC)* is a constitutional body, its formation and appointment process frequently generate political controversy. Bangladesh faces persistent problems of electoral violence, the use of muscle power, and deep mistrust among political parties regarding the credibility of elections. In particular, the elections of **2014, 2018, and 2024** have faced widespread criticism—both domestically and internationally—over issues of transparency and fairness (Ref: Riaz, A., 2019).

Pakistan's electoral system appears robust on paper but is plagued by structural weaknesses in practice. Prior to elections, an interim or caretaker government is formed; however, this differs from Bangladesh's former model, as the caretaker prime minister is appointed through consensus between the government and the opposition. The *Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP)* frequently operates under indirect pressure from the military, commonly referred to as "*the establishment*." There is intense debate over the role of military intelligence agencies in shaping electoral outcomes and influencing party alignments (Ref: Jaffrelot, C., 2015). Ballot manipulation and *pre-poll rigging* are so pervasive in Pakistan that losing parties rarely accept election results, repeatedly pushing the country toward constitutional crises.

Electoral systems and political challenges of India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan in English:

| Sl. No. | Feature | India | Bangladesh | Pakistan |
|---------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|---|
| 1 | Electoral System | FPTP | FPTP | FPTP |
| 2 | Strength of Election Commission. | Extremely strong and independent. | Highly dependent on the executive branch. | Independent but influenced by the military. |
| 3 | Government During Elections. | Regular political government. | Party-based government (currently) | Caretaker government. |
| 4 | Voting Technology. | Fully EVM & VVPAT | Partial EVM & ballot | Mainly ballot paper |
| 5 | Public Trust | High | Low | Low and fragile |

India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan—all three South Asian states—follow a parliamentary democratic system and have adopted the **First-Past-the-Post (FPTP)** method for elections. However, significant differences can be observed among these countries in terms of election management, the effectiveness of election commissions, election-time governments, and public trust.

In **India**, the Election Commission is established as a strong, independent, and constitutional institution. It enjoys extensive authority in managing elections and is capable of exercising effective control over the executive branch. The full-scale use of **EVMs and VVPAT** has made the voting process relatively transparent and technology-driven, resulting in a comparatively higher level of public trust.

In **Bangladesh**, although the Election Commission is constitutionally independent, there are frequent allegations of executive influence and political interference in practice. Elections are currently held under incumbent party governments, which raises questions regarding opposition participation and the overall credibility of the electoral process. While **EVMs are used partially**, reliance on paper ballots still remains, often making elections controversial and leading to declining public confidence.

In **Pakistan**, although the Election Commission is constitutionally independent, the influence of the military remains a significant reality. In the past, elections were conducted under caretaker governments, but political instability and military intervention have weakened the electoral system. Since the voting process is primarily **paper-ballot based**, concerns regarding transparency and credibility persist, resulting in fragile public trust.

Overall, it can be argued that although all three countries employ the same electoral method, differences in **institutional strength, political culture, and administrative independence** have led to varying levels of effectiveness and acceptance of their electoral systems. For the consolidated development of democracy, genuine independence of election commissions, effective use of technology, and the building of public trust are essential.

The primary reason behind the success of **India's electoral system** lies in its **institutionalization**. India's Supreme Court and Election Commission function as complementary institutions. In contrast, in Bangladesh and Pakistan, electoral systems often become dependent on the political strategies of ruling parties. In Bangladesh, the prioritization of partisan interests over constitutional continuity, and in Pakistan, the intervention of non-civilian forces, have undermined the neutrality of electoral frameworks.

Political Party-Switching and Parliamentary Stability

The lifeblood of a parliamentary democracy lies in the independence of Members of Parliament (MPs) and the stability of the government. However, in South Asian politics, "horse-trading" or party-switching for personal gain has been a persistent problem. India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan have adopted different legal and constitutional mechanisms to address this issue.

In India's parliamentary history, the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a pronounced "Aya Ram Gaya Ram" culture, where MPs frequently switched parties for minor political gains. To curb this instability, the Rajiv Gandhi government introduced the **Anti-Defection Law** through the 52nd Amendment and the Tenth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in 1985. According to this law, if an elected member voluntarily leaves their party or disobeys the party whip during voting (or remains absent), they lose their parliamentary seat. Initially, if one-third of members defected, it was considered a "split," but the law was made stricter through the **91st Amendment in 2003**, which now allows defection to be recognized as valid only if at least two-thirds of party members switch together. This law has provided stability to long-term coalition governments (such as the NDA or UPA). Critics, however, argue that it limits MPs' freedom to vote according to their conscience.

In Bangladesh, the constitution contains an extremely strict and uncompromising anti-defection provision known as **Article 70**. According to this article, if a member of parliament votes against their party or resigns from it, their seat becomes vacant. Even remaining neutral against party decisions can, in many cases, risk loss of membership. The framers of the 1972 Constitution, drawing lessons from Pakistan's historically unstable parliamentary system, included this to prevent any government from being toppled suddenly through a no-confidence motion. Many political scientists argue that this provision has created "**parliamentary dictatorship**" in Bangladesh because MPs have no room to express views outside party leadership decisions, effectively turning the legislature into a "rubber stamp" institution. (Jahan, R., 2015)

In Pakistan, the culture of party-switching is mockingly referred to as "**Lotaism**." The history of changing loyalties among MPs is long and unresolved. Pakistan's Constitution includes an anti-defection provision under **Article 63**, but its implementation often depends on Supreme Court interpretations. During the fall of Imran Khan's government in 2022, party-switching became a central issue. The Supreme Court ruled that votes cast against party directives would not be counted. In Pakistan, defections are rarely spontaneous; rather, political parties are often engineered under pressure from military intelligence agencies, putting parliamentary stability at constant risk. This reflects the influence of a **hybrid democracy**, where civilian governance is continually constrained by non-civilian forces.

Comparative Analysis: Overview of the Three Countries:

| Sl. No. | Topic of Discussion | India | Bangladesh | Pakistan |
|---------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| 1 | Legal Basis | Tenth Schedule (strict) | Article 70 (extremely strict) | Article 63 (controversial) |
| 2 | MPs' Freedom of Speech | Limited (subject to party whip) | Almost non-existent | Moderate (depends on court interpretation) |
| 3 | Risk of Government Collapse | Low (two-thirds rule) | None (due to party loyalty) | High (influence of invisible forces) |
| 4 | Democratic Standard | Stable but mechanical | Stable but authoritarian | Unstable and fragile |

A comparative analysis of the **anti-defection laws** of the three countries shows that, although the shared objective is to ensure political stability, their democratic consequences differ significantly. In **India**, the *Tenth Schedule* reduces the risk of government collapse, but by subordinating Members of Parliament to party whips, it has created a form of mechanical democracy that restricts independent expression within the legislature. In **Bangladesh**, *Article 70* is even more stringent, effectively turning Parliament into a follower of the executive branch; as a result, while governments remain stable, authoritarian tendencies are reinforced. In contrast, in **Pakistan**, *Article 63-A* is relatively flexible and court-dependent, allowing MPs some degree of independence, but it also fuels party fragmentation and power struggles, thereby increasing political instability. Thus, this comparison clearly demonstrates that anti-defection laws play a crucial role not only in ensuring stability but also in determining the qualitative nature of democracy.

India's law represents an attempt to strike a balance in which both party discipline and stability are valued. Bangladesh's Article 70, while providing stability, has rendered parliamentary debate nearly moribund. On the other hand, Pakistan continues to be repeatedly damaged by a culture of defections driven less by legal frameworks and more by the intervention of informal forces, particularly the military. In the journey toward building a "**Developed India**", this institutional discipline among political parties has functioned as a major strength—one that remains largely absent in Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Political Impact on the Path toward a Developed India

The goal of "**Developed India**" (**Viksit Bharat**) is not merely an economic aspiration; it is the outcome of India's long-term political stability and democratic maturity. Compared to Bangladesh and Pakistan, India's progress can be analyzed through several key pillars of its political system.

One of the major strengths of India's democratic system is the continuity of core national policies despite changes in government. The economic liberalization initiated during **P. V. Narasimha Rao**'s tenure was consistently carried forward by subsequent governments—whether under **Atal Bihari Vajpayee** (right-wing) or **Manmohan Singh** (centre-left). The current **Modi government**'s initiatives such as *Make in India* and *Digital India* are likewise built upon the institutional and infrastructural foundations laid by previous administrations.

In contrast, an opposite trend is often observed in **Pakistan and Bangladesh**, where new governments frequently abandon or reverse the mega projects or policies of their predecessors—such as the *India-Bangladesh joint Rampal Power Plant project*, changes in *Independent Power Producer (IPP)* policies,

CPEC (China–Pakistan Economic Corridor) initiatives, IMF-backed economic reform programs, and others. Such policy reversals generate a crisis of confidence among foreign investors.

Election Commission India (ECI) ensures credible and orderly transfers of power. When a country can change governments regularly and peacefully through elections, global markets perceive it as a **low-risk investment destination**. India's stable political environment has attracted record levels of **foreign direct investment (FDI)** over the past decade. By contrast, Pakistan's political instability and controversies surrounding electoral transparency in Bangladesh often negatively affect the international credit ratings of both countries (by agencies such as *Standard & Poor's* and *Moody's*).

India's political structure is not solely dependent on the central government. Strong **state governments** actively compete in economic development. States such as **Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and Karnataka** leverage their political stability to attract global tech giants like *Apple* and *Google*. In Bangladesh, the highly centralized system of governance slows economic decision-making outside Dhaka. In Pakistan, political conflicts between the center and provinces (such as **Sindh and Punjab**) frequently obstruct national development projects.

India has also been able to politically engage its vast **youth population**. Through political will, India has implemented the **Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT)** system, which has reduced corruption and strengthened public trust in government. This has enhanced both voter awareness and electoral transparency. India's electoral system provides opportunities for marginalized communities to become stakeholders in power, thereby reducing the long-term risks of civil war or internal insurgency.

Comparative Economic-Political Indicators (2023–24):

| Indicator | India | Bangladesh | Pakistan |
|---|-------------|-------------------------|------------|
| Political Stability Index | High/Medium | Low (protests & unrest) | Very Low |
| Policy Continuity | 9/10 | 6/10 | 2/10 |
| Confidence in Foreign Investment | Strong | Moderate | Negligible |
| Global Innovation Index (Rank) | 40th | 102nd | 88th |

A comparative analysis of the **economic and political indicators of India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan during 2023–24** clearly reflects the divergent development trajectories of the three South Asian states. In terms of **political stability**, India occupies a relatively high to medium position, which has strengthened long-term policymaking and administrative effectiveness. In contrast, **Bangladesh** has experienced a decline in political stability due to recent protest movements, election-centered tensions, and administrative challenges. In **Pakistan**, persistent civil–military conflict, economic crisis, and frequent changes of government have rendered political stability extremely fragile.

On the **policy continuity index**, India scores **9 out of 10**, which has supported structural reforms, the expansion of the digital economy, and industrial development. Bangladesh holds a **moderate position (6/10)**, but policy uncertainty and institutional weaknesses have partially undermined its investment climate. Pakistan's score of only **2 out of 10** reflects severe policy instability and administrative failure.

In terms of **foreign investment confidence**, India has achieved a high level of trust, leading to increased global capital inflows and growing interest from multinational corporations. Bangladesh maintains a moderate level of investor confidence, but the absence of deep structural reforms has limited its potential. In Pakistan, due to political and economic risks, foreign investment has become almost negligible.

According to the **Global Innovation Index**, India ranks **40th**, indicating progress in technology, startup culture, and research. Bangladesh (**102nd**) and Pakistan (**88th**) lag far behind, signaling weaknesses in human capital development, research investment, and the overall innovation ecosystem.

Overall, these indicators demonstrate that **political stability and policy continuity are essential for economic development and global competitiveness**. While India is comparatively ahead in this regard, Bangladesh and Pakistan continue to face major challenges in establishing structural reforms and sustainable political stability.

A major strength in India's journey toward becoming a “**Developed India**” lies in its **institutional balance**. Whereas Pakistan and Bangladesh have become increasingly dependent on individuals or specific political parties, India has strengthened its reliance on institutions such as the **Supreme Court, the Election Commission, and the Reserve Bank of India**. Because of this institutional strength, Indian politics has become a driving force—rather than an obstacle—for India's economic growth.

Challenges of Bangladesh and Pakistan: A Political Autopsy

While India is strengthening its democratic institutions and advancing toward the goal of a “**Developed India**,” Bangladesh and Pakistan remain burdened by deep structural and political-cultural crises. These challenges are not merely electoral in nature; they pose profound threats to overall state stability.

Bangladesh: The Paradox of Growth without Political Inclusion

Bangladesh's current political landscape is marked by a distinct **paradox**—visible economic progress alongside a severe deficit in political inclusion.

1. **Crisis of Electoral Legitimacy and Trust:** Since the abolition of the caretaker government system in 2011, intense political violence and mistrust have emerged before and after every general election. The legitimacy of the **2014, 2018, and 2024 elections** has been widely contested both domestically and internationally. This has created a rupture in the *social contract* between the state and its citizens.
2. **Centralization of Power and Article 70:** As discussed earlier, **Article 70** has rendered Bangladesh's Parliament largely ineffective. The absence of space for dissent within political parties has fostered a *winner-take-all* mentality. As a result, systems of **checks and balances** have eroded, and corruption has become institutionalized.
3. **Shrinking Civil Society and Media Space:** A strong democracy requires effective *watchdogs*. In Bangladesh, laws such as the **Digital Security Act (now the Cyber Security Act)** and various administrative pressures have curtailed civil society and media freedom. In the long run, this contraction undermines state transparency and accountability.

Pakistan: The Crisis of a Praetorian State

Pakistan's crisis is fundamentally that of a **praetorian state**, where civilian leadership has never achieved full control over governance.

- The “Establishment” and Military Intervention:** In Pakistan's politics, the military is not merely an institution but a major political and economic force. The role of military intelligence agencies in influencing election outcomes, engineering party fragmentation or formation, and removing prime ministers has transformed Pakistan's democracy into a **hybrid model** (Ref: Jaffrelot, C., 2015).
- Political Polarization and Populism:** The arrest of **Imran Khan** and the events that followed demonstrate that political polarization in Pakistan has reached an extreme level. The absence of national consensus among major political parties has repeatedly pushed the country toward the brink of bankruptcy.
- Lotaism and Ideology-Free Politics:** In Pakistan, political defection driven by personal interests—often referred to as *horse-trading*—is so pervasive that no government can formulate or sustain credible long-term plans.

Comparative Analysis of Constraints

| Type of Challenge | Bangladesh | Pakistan | India (Challenges on the Path to Development) |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| Core Issue | Lack of electoral neutrality | Military intervention | Lack of transparency in political financing |
| Parliamentary Character | Dominated by a single party | Unstable and conflict-prone | Diverse and competitive |
| Judicial Role | Subservient to the executive | Overactive but controversial | Largely independent and influential |
| Economic Impact | Growth exists but governance is weak | Extreme inflation and debt crisis | Sustainable and high growth |

The three major South Asian states—**Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India**—are encountering different types of structural and institutional obstacles in their democratic and developmental trajectories. The discussion above presents a comparative picture of these challenges.

In **Bangladesh**, the principal obstacle is the absence of electoral neutrality. Executive influence over the electoral process and the limited participation of opposition political forces have effectively turned Parliament into an institution dominated by a single political force. As a result, **accountable governance** has weakened, and there are frequent criticisms that the judiciary, in many cases, plays a subordinate role to the executive. Although the country has achieved notable economic growth, shortcomings in good governance, corruption, and institutional weakness have hindered the sustainability and inclusiveness of that growth.

In **Pakistan**, the primary challenge has historically been **military intervention**. Civilian governments have repeatedly faced direct or indirect pressure from the armed forces, making the parliamentary character of the system unstable and conflict-ridden. While the judiciary often assumes a hyper-active role, it frequently becomes the centre of political controversy. Alongside this, extreme inflation, external debt crises, and economic uncertainty have severely undermined the state's overall stability.

The situation in **India** is comparatively different. Here, the main challenge lies in the **lack of transparency in political financing**, which raises questions about democratic equality. Despite this, India's parliamentary

system remains pluralistic and competitive, and the judiciary is largely established as independent and influential. Owing to this institutional strength, India has been able to achieve **sustained and high economic growth**. However, if transparency in political financing is not ensured, structural risks may emerge on this otherwise advanced developmental path in the long run.

Overall, although the nature of obstacles differs across the three countries, the core problems are fundamentally linked to **institutional weaknesses**. While Bangladesh and Pakistan remain engaged in struggles to achieve basic democratic stability, India—positioned at a relatively more advanced stage—faces the challenge of improving the **quality of democracy** itself. This comparison clearly highlights the uneven trajectory of democratic development in South Asia.

The Link between Economic Development and Political Crisis

Although **Bangladesh's economic growth**—particularly in the *Ready-Made Garments (RMG) sector*—is commendable, it has not become sustainable due to the absence of political good governance. In contrast, **Pakistan's political instability** has made its economy almost entirely dependent on the **International Monetary Fund (IMF)**. Unlike India, both countries lack a recognized and peaceful mechanism for the transfer of political power, creating long-term uncertainty for investors.

Until the political parties of **Bangladesh and Pakistan** are able to reach a “**minimum national consensus**,” their electoral systems will remain largely ceremonial. India’s success lay in precisely this foundational consensus among political parties—that even in electoral defeat, the foundations of the state would not be shaken.

Key Findings:

This comparative study of the **electoral systems and political defection** in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan reveals the following key findings:

1. **Variation in Institutional Capacity:** India’s Election Commission and judiciary maintain a strong institutional balance, whereas in Bangladesh and Pakistan these institutions are often weakened by the influence of the executive branch or non-civilian forces.
2. **Defection and Parliamentary Democracy:** India’s **anti-defection law** adopts a middle-ground approach. Bangladesh’s **Article 70**, while ensuring extreme stability, has stifled the very lifeblood of democracy—*dissent*. In contrast, Pakistan’s weak legal framework and pervasive *lotaism* have turned Parliament into a political circus.
3. **Impact of Politics on Economic Progress:** India’s political continuity has directly facilitated the growth of **foreign direct investment (FDI)**. Although Bangladesh has advanced in terms of growth, its progress remains fragile due to weak governance, while Pakistan has been economically crippled by chronic political instability.
4. **Public Trust:** Public confidence in the electoral system is highest in India, currently declining in Bangladesh, and at a stage of extreme distrust in Pakistan.

Recommendations

India’s vision of becoming a “**Developed India**” rests not only on technological advancement but also on the continuity of democratic norms and institutions. Bangladesh and Pakistan have much to learn from this model, although significant reforms—tailored to their own political and social realities—are indispensable.

For Bangladesh:

- **Electoral Reform:** Establish the Election Commission through an independent and neutral **search committee** to restore confidence among all political parties.
- **Amendment of Article 70:** Revise Article 70 to allow Members of Parliament to vote independently on all issues except budget matters or no-confidence motions against the government, thereby fostering genuine parliamentary debate.

For Pakistan:

- **Civilian Supremacy:** Ensure parliamentary sovereignty by ending military interference in politics and removing intelligence agencies from political engineering.
- **Party Discipline:** Introduce a strong legal and ethical framework to curb *lotaism* (self-serving party defections) and strengthen political accountability.

For India:

- **Electoral Financing:** Increase transparency in political financing, including electoral bonds, to reduce the disproportionate influence of large corporate interests on politics.

The future of democracy in South Asia depends critically on the **political will** of these nations' leadership. If India can maintain its democratic standards, and Bangladesh and Pakistan can restore **transparency and inclusivity** in their electoral systems, the region has the potential to emerge as one of the world's strongest economic blocs. In essence: "**Free and fair elections are not just a mechanism for transferring power; they are the principal driver of sustainable development.**"

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