



# Journal of Contemporary Politics

## Original Article

## Regime Change and Democracy in Sikkim

Bishwas Mani Rai<sup>1,2,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PhD Scholar, Sikkim Central University, Sikkim, India

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, ICAFI University Sikkim, India

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 28.11.2023

Accepted 22.12.2023

Published 27.12.2023

#### \* Corresponding author.

Bishwas Mani Rai

bishwasmani1991@gmail.com

[https://doi.org/](https://doi.org/10.53989/jcp.v2i4.24.2)

10.53989/jcp.v2i4.24.2



### ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the intertwined dynamics of regime change, democracy, and political opposition in the context of Sikkim, a unique state nestled in the Himalayas. Firstly, it explores the theoretical underpinnings of regime change and democracy, examining their conceptual nuances and interplay. Secondly, it scrutinizes Sikkim's trajectory towards democracy, assessing the extent to which democratic values and institutions have taken root in its governance landscape. Finally, the paper evaluates the role of political opposition as a crucial component of a thriving democracy, probing where Sikkim currently stands in fostering robust oppositional voices within its political arena. Through this comprehensive analysis, the paper sheds light on Sikkim's journey towards democratic governance amidst the backdrop of regime change and highlights the challenges and prospects it faces in consolidating its democratic credentials.

**Keywords:** Regime Change; Democracy; Political Opposition Theoretical Construction; Sikkim

### THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTION

A regime may be thought of as the formal or informal organization of the centre of political power and of its relations with the broader society. To Fishman, a regime determines who has access to political power and how those who are in power deal with those who are not. Regime has less to do with power than it does with the way power is actually used (Fishman, 1990).

Moreover, it prompts the inquiry: what defines a regime type? Fishman contends that regime type encompasses classifications such as democracy, totalitarianism, and authoritarianism. He highlights that distinctions among these concepts are crucial "Regimes are more permanent forms of political organisation than the specific governments". In essence, while governments may undergo shifts, the fundamental structures of regimes tend to

persist. This notion aligns with the understanding that a change in government does not inherently signify a change in the overarching regime. Instead, it suggests that governments operating within a specific regime generally exhibit similar characteristics, as they adhere to or align with the overarching principles and norms of that regime. Moreover, the regime not only dictates the processes of government formation and operation but also establishes the parameters for their legitimacy and the scope of their authority (Fishman, 1990).

Krasner highlights that within a regime, changes typically pertain to rules and decision-making processes rather than fundamental norms and principles. However, when a regime change occurs, it entails a shift in the underlying norms and principles governing the regime itself. This concept is particularly applicable to political systems characterized by a strong tradition of constitutional governance, where



mechanisms for peaceful government succession, often through popular elections governed by established regime rules and procedures, are in place. In such contexts, a change in government does not necessarily indicate a disruption in the constitutional framework. Here, the notion of regime is closely intertwined with the principles associated with constitutionalism<sup>1</sup> (Krasner, 1983).

The doctrine of constitutionalism imparts significance by delineating specific boundaries for governments and guiding the conduct of politics and state affairs in a general sense. By imposing constraints and establishing rules for political behavior, constitutionalism underscores the fundamental norms of democratic politics. To summarize, regimes encapsulate the norms and principles governing the political organization of the state, as outlined in the rules and procedures that govern governmental operations<sup>1</sup> (Krasner, 1983).

Now talking about democracy, Daniel Lavine notes without an adequate concept of democracy the entire effort attempting to understand regime change stalls virtually at the starting point. Also although, there may be an evolving consensus on what democracy means there is no cause for satisfaction<sup>2</sup> (Lavine, 1988).

Democracy as Stephanie Lawson says is one regime type, this has suffered some loss of meaning because it is applied to or claimed by many a wide variety of regimes and requires more practical need to establish conceptual clarity in regime change theory. We do not find specific meaning of the term democracy<sup>3</sup> (Lawson, 1993). According to Vel Not only in media but also in academic writing democracy is often not specified but taken for granted (Vel, 2008).

The ancient Greek origin of the term 'democracy' translates to 'rule of the people'. It is commonly understood as a system of governance where voters elect representatives to advocate for their interests, typically exemplified in modern liberal democracies (Vel, A.C., Reform Politics). However, democracy encompasses more than just governance by elected officials. Diamond, Linz, and Lipset, in their work "Politics in Developing Countries: Comparing Experiences with Democracy" (1995), identified three fundamental conditions essential for democracy through their comparative study of democratic practices across numerous developing nations (Vel, 2008)

1. Meaningful and extensive competition among individuals and organised groups (political parties) for all effective positions of government power through regular, free and fair elections that exclude the use of force.
2. Highly inclusive level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies.
3. A level of civil and political liberties – Freedom of thought and expression, freedom of press, freedom of assembly and demonstration, freedom to form or join organisations, freedom from terror and unjustified

imprisonment, secured through political equality and rule of law, sufficient to ensure that citizens can develop and advocate their views and interest and contest policies (Constitutional liberalism – taken as a democratic package).

Lawson asserts that democracy characterizes a distinct form of governance, not simply any regime that labels itself as such. She posits that in today's mass politics, specific minimum criteria must be fulfilled for a regime to be truly considered 'democratic.' Fundamentally, democracy involves the institutional mechanisms through which the authority of the populace is expressed through representative frameworks, suggesting that a limited number of individuals oversee the system<sup>3</sup> (Lawson, 1993).

Contrarily, Graham Maddox observes that there are no definitive dimensions or sub-concepts universally accepted as characteristics of democracy. These encompass values such as equality, liberty, justice, and community, along with representative institutions, electoral systems, a plurality of political parties, participation, and free opposition. While some of these elements may hold greater significance than others<sup>4</sup> (Maddox, 1986).

Gallie suggests that democracy is complex internally, allowing for various interpretations where different aspects are prioritized differently. Establishing a definitive set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the proper implementation of democracy is considered unfeasible. However, it is possible to delineate certain criteria as necessary, though not entirely sufficient conditions, for qualifying a regime as democratic<sup>5</sup> (Gallie, 1986).

If democratization represents a political shift towards greater government accountability, increased competitiveness in elections, and enhanced protection of civil and political rights, it encompasses more than just electoral processes. Restricting democratization solely to electoral democracy would lead elected governments to perceive themselves as possessing absolute power, potentially exploiting the system to their advantage.

## POLITICAL OPPOSITION AS NECESSARY CONDITION FOR DEMOCRACY

The purpose of this paper is to understand how far Sikkim has gone in its way of democracy? Considering political opposition as necessary condition for democracy the purpose here is to understand Sikkim's position in its democratization process.

This is not to disregard the importance of other elements or dimensions (including other types of opposition), nor to claim presence of political opposition as a sufficient condition. As Dahl in his 'Political Opposition in Western Democracies' observed "one is important to regard the existence of an opposition party as a very nearly the most distinctive characteristic of democracy itself, absence of an



opposition party is taken as an evidence, if not always conclusive proof, for the absence of democracy”

### ***Why political opposition is a necessary condition for democracy***

Some western scholars like Lawsone and Vel points out:

- The idea of constitutional political opposition means amongst other things, the right of political opposition to show dissatisfaction, opinion etc within some limits that can be legitimately expressed.
- In democracy the purpose of political opposition is to become the government and to do so within the rules and procedures contained in the existing regime.
- On this account the power of the government in democratic regime is always conditional and always temporary. It is conditional because it is subject to limitations on its power imposed by doctrine of constitutionalism and it is temporary because it is subject to periodic judgement of people who may choose to replace it with an alternative government.
- When we talk about political opposition in representative democracy the role of political parties become central.
- The growth of political opposition in democratic regime depends on the existence of competitive party system, where competitive interaction is formed between parties. For this it is obvious it requires more than one party to be a system of this kind. And the idea that there could be any sort of competition for office with only one participant is absurd (illogical).
- The people consist of entire body of citizens, not just a majority. Though in representative democracy the concept of majoritarianism is implied but one party cannot claim to represent an entire political community. The political opposition makes legitimate provision for expression of minority interest and opinion.

### ***Regime Change, Democracy and Political Opposition in Sikkim***

Sikkim had been a theocratic monarchical state until it was merged with Indian Union in 1975. With the merger to the Indian union Sikkim saw a regime change in its larger political process. On May 16, 1975 when Sikkim formally became a part of India or merged with India as its 22<sup>nd</sup> state this ended the theocratic monarchical rule forever and established parliamentary democracy in Sikkim. We can say Sikkim so far experienced two regime type: Monarchical and Democratic.

Before 1975 the political process of Sikkim were guided by the norms and principles of monarchical regime. Though Sikkim were first under British protectorate and later under India's protectorate that brought change within a regime but

did not totally changed the regime. The Sikkimese ruler or Chogyal who was a hereditary ruler who possessed absolute power and ruled by durbar decrees (through Extraordinary Gazetteers). There were no codified rules even for High Courts (established in Sikkim 1955) (His whims were the rules, his grace the qualification.) The Kazis who were the feudal lords and Thekadars (the contractors) were vested with enormous power over the land. In the political system below the ruler there was Sidlon or Dewan, Indian Political officer – J.S.Lall in 1949. Below that a Sikkim State Council (to allow const govt the Chogyal) was formed, where it represented political parties of Sikkim along with the communal representation. In 1953 the first election to the State Council was held. Along with these the system of ‘Dyarchy’ was also introduced (the reserved subjects were in the hands of Chogyal and the transferred were to be represented by peoples representative. The local self-government was also introduced in 1948, 1951 first election for the panchayats were held (One tier panchayat system Sikkim had adopted – Block Council).

Before merger or regime change, Sikkimese political system saw limited evidence of political participation<sup>6</sup> (Sinha, Gazeteer of Sikkim). There was no viable democratic institution in Sikkim. There was no majority rule. There was no Opposition in the state council (the majority of the councillors were either appointed as Executive Councillors or nominated by the ruler). In local self government the voters had to be the property owners and the members of Block council were largely nominated on the ground of safeguarding the minority. The political parties also had little or institutional organisational maturity.

In a democratic regime in Sikkim, with the introduction of democracy, we can trace a difference in the manner in which the power is used. The access to political power which was absolutely in the hands of Chogyal and his intermediaries now shifted to the people's representative. The government now functions under the banner of constitutionalism and faces a limit in the manner in which his power is used (Separation of power, Constitution defines his power).

If we go on to analyse political opposition in Sikkim which is one essential or necessary condition for democracy: The analysis of election results (from 1979-2014)

Sikkim has witnessed 9 general elections including the election of 1974.

Firstly we can see that the people of Sikkim in a new democratic regime after its merger with Indian Union favour the regional parties than the National one (unlike other states of North East). No national party has ever come to power in the state through elections. Though INC started contesting election since 1979 and BJP since 1994 but they have not been able to influence the mind of the people of Sikkim.

Second, what we generally see in this region is pro-incumbency factor operating. In Sikkim's approximately 50



year history of democracy we find two distinct eras – The first era was that of Nar Bahadur Bhandari who ruled the state for 15 years between 1979-1994 (except for two breaks in between). In 1994 assembly election turned the table in favour of Pawan Kumar Chamling leader of SDF party, who now ruled Sikkim for 25 years.

Sikkim's political history reflects the trend of one party dominance syndrome, which is danger to the practice of democracy. Whichever party is in power whether it is Sikkim Democratic Front now or Sikkim Sangram Parishad earlier the ruling party enjoyed a great majority with no opponent at all. One would say that these were the government chosen by the voters, but it is quite evident that it is because of a lack of strong opposition party.

The Sikkim Sangram Parishad which ruled Sikkim for two consecutive periods had become almost non-existent in 2004 election. And other small opponent parties like (Rising Sun, Dendong Peoples Chogpi, Himali Rastra Parishad) in Sikkim did not maintain its stability and failed to perform active political opposition role that also contributed to the pro-incumbency factor in Sikkim.

It was in 2014 election we can see some effective change again in Sikkim politics, where SKM party has won 10 seats out of 32. Formed in the year 2013, it is the only major opposition party in Sikkim and also now holds second largest party inside the state legislative house of Sikkim with one position.

### ***Some reasons for why political opposition in Sikkim was lacking behind***

Lack of education which led to political unawareness: Prior to 1975 (because it was the beginning of democratic government in Sikkim) and it was a Monarchy, there was no such need for the people of Sikkim to understand the workings of democratic form of government or of politics in general. Hence, it resulted in a rushed sort of initiation for the Sikkimese people into the world of democracy. Moreover, Sikkim was also lacking in the educational sector. When Sikkim became a part of India in 1975, the education in Sikkim was still at an elementary stage. The literacy rate was below 50%. 17.74 % literacy rate was figured according to 1971 census. That slowly went up to 41.59% in 1981 and 82.20% in 2011 (population 1971: 209843 -.2011: 607688). The lack of political awareness gave Sikkimese people a one dimensional view of democracy, wherein the ruling government represented their notion of democracy; they never felt the need for an opposition. One of the principle ideals of democracy is the presence of strong opposition which counter balances the equation of democracy and that has been lacking in Sikkim for quite some time.

Another factor is that after the formation of the democratic government, there was a huge need for educated Sikkimese citizens for filling up various official, administrative, teaching posts (tertiary sector alone – 13.74 % were recorded in 1980-81, public Adm had 11.30%). This shift in man power and possible political resources also left a gaping hole in what could have been the formation of strong opposition party. Ever since, in this two era of government in Sikkim there have been instances of many opposition party formations but none of them have been much magnitude that is required to balance the equilibrium of a democratic state.

There is no denying the fact that in representative parliamentary democracy, acquiring majority of seats will lead to the formation of a ruling government but another necessary aspect of democracy lies in the existence of an opposition which can be voice for the political minorities, which may be less in number but they will be an integral part of the political system. For example if we look at 2014 election, Sikkim saw defection of 7 MLA's from the opposition SKM to the then ruling party SDF. This kind of political defection definitely breaks the trust of the common people on democracy. It fosters a very hostile environment and renders the opposition weak and also tarnishes the face of democracy.

### **CONCLUSION**

Looking back at Sikkim's history of approximately 50 years we see no opposition or very loose opposition in the two era of one party dominance. This is not an issue that arose because of a single reason; it is a culmination of many factors. It is not Chamling's government or Bhandari's government who can be blamed, the 'political culture' is also at fault as seen from the absence of a political opposition. Since political opposition was more or less lacking in Sikkim for so long, the power of the government in democratic regime is conditioned but can it be called temporary is a matter of question.

### **REFERENCES**

1. Stephen KD. International Regimes. Ithaca. Cornell University Press. 1983.
2. Levine DH. Paradigm Lost: Dependence to Democracy. *World Politics*. 1988;40(3):377–394. Available from: <https://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2010218>.
3. Lawson, Stephen. Conceptual Issues in the Comparative Study of Regime Change and Democratization. *Comparative Politics*. 1993;25(2):183–183.
4. Maddox G. Contours of a democratic polity. *Politics*. 1986;21(2):1–11. Available from: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00323268608401990>.
5. Gallie WB. Essentially Contested Concepts. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. 2019;56:121–146.
6. Sinha AC. Politics of Sikkim: A Sociological study. New Delhi, Thomson.

