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Q3(b)

Critically examine the role of political parties in sustaining and stabilising democracies in the developing societies.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · PSIR GS 2 · 15 marks · Politics of Representation and Participation

Politics of Representation and Participation: Political parties, pressure groups and social movements in advanced industrial and developing societies.

Core demand of the question

- State how parties can sustain democracy (aggregation, opposition, turnover, institution-building)
- Show the record in developing societies, including India
- **Critically examine failures:** ethnicity, personalism, clientelism, capture

Revision summary

Parties can sustain developing democracies by aggregating conflict, training elites and making peaceful turnover possible.

Huntington's institutionalisation and India's early Congress incorporation illustrate the positive case.

Failures include family vehicles, ethnic census parties, clientelism and polarising attacks on referees.

Existence of parties is not the same as a party system that can lose.

- **Critical verdict:** necessary organisations whose quality decides whether democracy thickens or hollows.

Introduction

In developing societies, **political parties** are often the main machine that turns a constitution into a living democracy. They recruit leaders, aggregate demands, fight elections and, in the best case, accept defeat. The question asks for a **critical** examination of that role in **sustaining and stabilising** democracy. The verdict is mixed: parties are necessary, and they are frequently the source of the instability they are asked to cure.

Body

How parties can stabilise

E. E. Schattschneider said democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties. **Samuel Huntington** treated institutionalised parties as the difference between participation that strengthens order and participation that wrecks it. In a poor or post-colonial society, parties can: (1) **aggregate** language, caste, class and region into a bargain instead of a militia; (2) **train** a political class that knows how to run ministries; (3) offer **peaceful turnover** so that losers still have a future; (4) link the village to the capital through patronage that, at its least bad, is a form of incorporation. India's **Congress system** in the early decades, whatever its

later decay, did this incorporation. Later **coalition years** and a competitive national party system showed that democracy can survive without a single dominant party if parties still treat the **Election Commission** and the Constitution as binding.

Elsewhere, **South Africa's** ANC after apartheid, **Chile's** concertación years, and parts of **Ghana** and **Senegal** show parties as roofs over social conflict. Internationally, party internationals and election observation try to socialise that role.

Critical failures

Many developing democracies have **parties that are not organisations**. They are vehicles for a family, a business house or an ethnic census. **Mainwaring and Scully's work on institutionalisation is the standard warning: where labels change every election, voters cannot reward or punish a programme, and presidents rule through deals.** **Ethnic parties** can mobilise turnout and also lock minorities out, turning democracy into a rotating capture of the state. **Clientelism** buys the poor at the cost of public goods. **One-party dominance** can freeze opposition until the street explodes. Military-tutelary systems keep parties as decoration.

Parties also **polarise**. When they treat opponents as enemies of the nation, they eat the referees - courts, election bodies, the press - which is the backsliding path known from **Levitsky and Ziblatt**. Developing societies with young institutions are more exposed to that path because alternative organisations (unions, professional bodies) are thinner.

Verdict

Parties sustain democracy when they are **programmatic enough to be accountable** and **restrained enough to lose**. They destabilise democracy when they are militias in party clothing or when they become the private property of a leader. The critical examination therefore refuses two cartoons: that parties are a Western luxury poor countries cannot afford, and that any party system is automatically a democratic good. **Stabilisation is a quality of party institutionalisation**, not of the mere existence of party names on a ballot.

Flow diagram

Parties -> Aggregation turnover institutions
Parties -> Ethnic personal clientelist capture
Aggregation turnover institutions -> Stabilised democracy
Ethnic personal clientelist capture -> Unstable or hollow democracy

Conclusion

Political parties remain the ordinary instrument of democratic stability in developing societies: they aggregate, incorporate and allow defeat. They also organise ethnic capture, clientelism and executive assault on referees. The role is indispensable and double-edged. Institutionalised, bounded parties sustain democracy. Personal and ethnic machines consume it.

Facts & figures

Huntington

Political Order in Changing Societies: institutionalised parties channel participation; weak parties plus mobilisation produce decay.

Mainwaring and Scully

Party-system institutionalisation as a variable that explains Latin American democratic performance.

Congress system

Early independent India used a dominant party as an incorporating machine; later competition showed democracy can outlive that machine.

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