Voting for Impunity: On the Conceptual Limits of Patronage Democracy

Matthew J. Nelson

Is the selective distribution of impunity, as an excludable (patronage) good, consistent with the meaning of 'democracy'? Insisting that our understanding of democracy must expand to include non-Western forms of electoral accountability, an influential body of subaltern studies scholarship led by Partha Chatterjee argues that it is, particularly insofar as such impunity facilitates a measure of survival-based 'justice' for the poor (e.g. squatters). I challenge this view, noting that, in addition to electoral accountability, a commitment to the delineation of enforceable laws is indispensable for any coherent conceptualisation of democracy. While embracing wide variations in the content of local laws (and values), I exclude 'contradictory enforcement regimes' from the conceptual terrain of democracy. Revising Chatterjee, I clarify the parameters of vernacular democracy in two notoriously difficult cases: patronage democracy in India and Islamic democracy in Muslim-majority countries like Pakistan.