Democracy and Law in the Struggle to Eradicate Extreme Poverty

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Abstract

While the global community focuses its efforts on ending distressing levels of poverty, the democratization efforts in many countries appear to have stagnated or reversed course. Disappointment is spreading that democracy has not been able to provide adequate security, stability, or safety— as well as basic welfare and livelihood. Inequality and poverty, the visible and hard-felt sides of current global and local politics, have led to well-established democracies being shocked by political changes that appear to be anti-democratic in nature. Many transitioning, post-conflict countries struggle to both democratize and repair the damage resulting from elevated levels of people suffering under multidimensional forms of poverty. This paper examines elements of democratic governance and legal reforms that need to be prioritized to deliver on the promises of eradicating extreme poverty and improving well-being. United Nations-led peacebuilding projects, for example, aim to find concrete and effective ways to address socio-economic inequalities and livelihood problems that are risk factors for conflict relapses or government/ institutional collapses. Democracy, however, has stopped being a priority goal/value for peacebuilding implementation. Instead, prioritization has landed on identifying inequalities and developing measures for increased inclusivity in process rather than system. The social justice cause of improving participation levels takes on the mantle of democracy. Specific individuals and social groups are protected (justly so), but at the expense of broader notions of democratization. At the same time, with any growth in inequality and rising poverty, blame will often first go to perceived gaps in a state's democracy, representativeness, day-to-day politics, governance structures, or elected institutions. Post-conflict transition contexts need to better address problems such as poverty and rising income/social inequalities while also underscoring the reasons and justifications for any democratization measures.