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HOW DEMOCRACY IS EXPERIENCED

Background note (3) prepared for the Wilton Park Conference on Democracy and Development, 23-25 October 2007

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How Democracy is Experienced¹

It is not easy to know how people experience democracy. Amartya Sen defends his account of development as freedom on the basis that freedom is both inherently desirable and an efficient means of promoting other ends. People benefit from the right to an education, and their freedom to protest helps protect them against famines or the under-supply of health-care and education (Sen 2000). It would seem that we could proceed in similar fashion in regard to democracy. We know that people value it inherently when they make an effort to vote, or when they protest rigged elections or the imposition of authoritarian rule. Formal democratic politics is experienced most acutely when it is absent or threatened, when rights are taken away. But people also make claims about the instrumental benefits of democracy, and here we need to tread more carefully. Reported experiences of democracy are usually made about practices of government that link individuals to one another and to various agencies of the state. People experience a broader culture of democracy in terms of their dealings with police officers and other government personnel, and through their participation in school oversight or health committees, social movements or trade unions. Their ability to complain effectively or to be treated by officials with respect are just two indices of what we might call democracy in action.

All of these experiences matter a great deal, of course, and will often be reported differently by men and women, or by rich and poor people. We also know that democracy comes in many different shapes and sizes, and is governed by different sets of rules, both formal and informal. It can be more or less representative, and more or less deliberative. Likewise, it can be more or less decentralised, and more or less dominated by political elites or 'big men'. All democracies are hybrids in some degree, both formally and more substantively. For this reason, too, we have to be careful in assuming one-to-one correspondence effects between reported welfare/illfare effects and particular forms of government. Suppose people believe that formal democratic politics has promoted positive changes in their livelihoods, and/or senses of empowerment. An instrumental defence of democracy might then be funnelled back into strong endorsements of its inherent value. In contrast, where democratic forms of rule seemingly fail to provide people with these improvements, or appear to lead in the opposite direction – to the under-provision of security and other public goods, to the decentralisation of corruption, to unwelcome time costs, and so on – we might expect weakening support for democratic institutions and the merits of democratic deepening. This will be especially the case where people value state effectiveness, or a Weberian sense of order, more than any particular system of rules linking rulers to ruled.

¹ I am grateful to John Gaventa for helpful comments on a first draft of this paper.

In all of these cases, however, we need to be clear that we are mainly – and necessarily - dealing with experiences as reported beliefs and perceptions. In terms of public policy, we would be ill advised to confuse reported support for user groups, say, or improved forms of accountability within local government, with the merits of democracy-in-general. Many of these technologies of government can also take root as democratic spaces within authoritarian regimes. The most competent of these regimes might provide public goods more efficiently than some democracies.² They might also endow a greater range of people with the skills and resources (e.g. literacy, land rights, jobs) that are needed for effective participation in the public sphere. At the same time, we need to be wary of defining democracy so thinly that it refers only to formal democratic politics, whether at the national, regional or local scales. People’s experiences and expectations of ‘democracy’ can be shaped at the workplace or in the home and government offices, and will often feed through – for better or worse - into their reports of the merits of democratic politics more specifically. By the same token, we should not assume that growing distrust in formal institutions of democracy, whether in Brazil, Russia or the UK, means that people are uninterested in democratic deepening. Experiences and expectations of democracy are linked in subtle and often complex ways, and it is important to guard against false inferences.

I. Why do poor people value democratic politics? What do they expect to achieve from it?

We should expect poor people to value democratic politics for the same reasons as most other people – notably for the fact that it provides voice and a measure of accountability. Poor people might also value democracy as a means by which weight of numbers can leverage transfers of power and resources in their direction. None of these reasons makes especially robust assumptions about the information sets available to poor people. Excluded and vulnerable people might not be able to describe the precise workings of a democratic polity. They might not even care much about these details, particularly where their expectations of real change or personal benefits are low. For the most part, though, it makes sense to assume that poor people have a reasonable – and suitably cynical - understanding of some of the core functions and purposes of democratic politics.³

So, do poor people value democratic politics?⁴ We can start at the national scale. The evidence from China and other countries in east Asia is decidedly mixed. It has led some people to conclude that democracy is a western model of politics that is at odds with local conceptions of hierarchy. Others fear it does not support rapid economic growth. Elsewhere, however, in countries as diverse as

² This should not be construed as an argument in favour of authoritarianism as a general system of rule. Democratic regimes can be preferred on the basis (a) that they better protect liberty; (b) that competent authoritarian regimes are less common than incompetent/brutal authoritarian regimes; and (c) that even competent authoritarian regimes can lapse quickly into incompetence or brutality.

³ See the discussion by Vishwaranjan Raju in Corbridge et al (2005, Appendix 2). VR provides a graphic account of how villagers in the north Bihar parliamentary constituency of Hajipur discussed the 1999 General Election. He begins: “Poor rural Indians are intelligent enough to know that seeing colourful helicopters in the sky means that election season has come again. They can easily make the assumption that white *khadi-dhari* [traditionally dressed, neo-Gandhian] politicians with huge crowds will again become the talk of villagers. A long procession of motor cars, new models of cars, will again move around these villagers. At the same time they become afraid, remembering what happened in the last election. There was no commercial vehicle for the last three days of the election. If anyone had an emergency the only option was to go to Hajipur by bicycle. There was no doctor in hospital as somebody told them that he was on election duty. School-going children were free to move in the fields. [And violence was likely to break out between competing caste groups]” (2005: 284).

⁴ Given space constraints, and the broader remit of the Wilton Park conference, the balance of this paper is tilted rather more to democratic *politics* (formal and informal, at different spatial scales) and rather less to participatory development or other ‘new political spaces’ (on which see Gaventa 2006, and Cornwall 2006). Needless to add, the two spheres overlap significantly, and experiences formed in one can affect perceptions of the other, as should be evident here.

Argentina, El Salvador, Nepal, Pakistan, Ukraine and South Africa, we have seen concerted efforts by ordinary people to bring forms of democratic politics (back) to their countries. Many people have been killed in these struggles, suggesting strong support for democratic practices and values. In India, too, uniquely, poor rural women are now more likely to vote in parliamentary elections than rich urban males, and this in a country where turnout rates have generally been 60-65% in national elections. We also have good reasons to suppose that poor voters in India have largely broken free of the vertical vote banks that dominated electoral politics into the 1970s. The employee no longer has to vote for the candidate of the employer. Poor voters are now more likely to join horizontal vote banks – casting their votes as Yadavs or Muslims, say – a point I shall come back to. In Latin America, in contrast, where voting and electoral registration are often mandatory, if not always enforced, voter turnout rates averaged just 61% from 1990-2004 (IADB, 2007); the corresponding figure for sub-Saharan Africa, meanwhile, is reported by International IDEA as 54%.

Of course, the simple act of voting doesn't tell us that much about degrees of attachment to the democratic process. People might choose not to vote while still expressing support for the principle of fair elections, or for a free press and an independent judiciary. Others might report their approval/disapproval for democracy when what they really have in mind is their approval rating for government. On balance, though, it makes sense to assume that people can distinguish between democratic and non-democratic regimes of governance, and that they signal their preference on the basis of a reasonable degree of knowledge.

Staying with Latin America, then, it might be thought troubling that Latinobarómetro reports that the percentage of people describing democracy as 'preferable' to authoritarianism was down from 62% in 1996-67 to 53% in 2003-04. Support for democracy ranged from over 70% in Uruguay and Costa Rica (both down from over 80% in 1996-7), and in Venezuela under Chavez (up from 63%), to just 34% in Guatemala and 38% in Brazil (cited in IADB, 2007, Table 10.3) Put another way, about one in three of those surveyed did not prefer democracy to other forms of rule, putting the region about on a par with Africa. Rich and poor people were represented in this group broadly in line with their shares of the population at large. In post-communist Russia, public opinion polls continue to report high levels of trust in President Putin, but extremely low levels of trust (10-20%) in the government, the security services, political parties, bankers, enterprise directors, or parliament. Intriguingly, while the 2001 findings of the New Russia Barometer surveys suggested that "as many as 72% of Russians endorse one of four undemocratic alternatives to the present system (ranging from the restoration of communist rule, the most popular of these alternatives, to rule by a dictator or the army", both the Barometer and other studies reported that "about 80% of respondents viewed [with favour] the post-Soviet government as permitting greater individual freedom in speech, religion and political participation when compared with the old regime" (Sil and Chen 2004: 353-4).

Attachments to liberal conceptions of national democratic politics are clearly ambivalent in parts of Latin America and Russia. In 2001, many ordinary Russians failed to see how political systems based around 'freedom and participation', which they broadly favoured, were translating into their core goals of economic prosperity, fairness in the judicial system, and the provision by government of security and basic material needs (ibid.: 354). Expectations about the probity and competence of elected agents probably ran too high. They also ran ahead of the powers of the principals (the voters) to constrain their agents or hold them to account. Since 2001 new expectations have been formed, as they are constantly forming in all systems of rule, democratic or otherwise. Experiences of democracy are always mediated by expectations. They are never a function of outcomes alone.

Nowhere is this more the case than India, where universal suffrage has been in place since 1950, and where the democratic polity is three-tiered. The commitment of poorer people to the democratic process in India can seem remarkable. After all, more than 600 million Indians are still living on less than two dollars a day, sixty years after Independence in 1947. What can democracy and freedom

mean to such people? Do they simply have low expectations? Wouldn't they have been better served by a competent authoritarian regime, such as in China either side of the Cultural Revolution – a regime that took seriously the claim made in an Oxfam poster in the 1970s that 'Freedom Begins With Breakfast'? What lessons can we learn about the expectations and experiences of poor people in a low-income country where elections are now held on a regular basis at the national, State [regional] and local levels?

The most general lesson is one that bears repeating: it takes time for poor women and men to form robustly positive expectations of the inherent and instrumental virtues of democracy, if indeed they ever do. The introduction of universal suffrage into India in the 1950s did not sweep aside long-standing practices of oppression and discrimination based around caste, class and gender. Battles had to be fought around land rights, divorce, untouchability and temple entry (to name just four), before poorer people could even begin to see themselves as rights-bearing citizens or as members of powerful political communities. Democratic deepening in India also had to await a serious challenge to the hegemony of the Congress Party. Political competition matters.

A second lesson is that poor people often vote in strongly instrumental terms and in line with ascriptive identities. Kanchan Chandra (2004) argues that the chief concern of poor voters across north India is to vote for representatives from their own 'ethnic group', but only where there is a good chance that the chosen person and/or party will win. Voters' reasons for doing so vary in terms of specifics but not in terms of their overall orientation to important goals. Some will vote for Party A for protection. For example, Muslims voted *en bloc* for Laloo Yadav in Bihar in the 1990s because they knew he would protect them against Hindu extremists. Others will vote for Party B in the expectation of a public sector job, or if not a job a hospital bed, and if not a hospital bed a place on an employment guarantee scheme run by a contractor who raised votes for a political broker (and thence for an MP or Member of the Legislative Assembly).

A third lesson is that many poor people still participate in politics in India at a distance or through intermediaries. Affirmative action does seem to be helping. It has brought some members of India's Scheduled Castes and Tribes (*dalits* and *adivasis*) into the public sphere, and more recently Indian women as well. At least one third of those elected to local government bodies must now be female. There is some evidence that women who are being elected to *panchayats* today are less under the control of their husbands or male relatives than was the case ten years ago.⁵ There is also some cross-country evidence which suggests that women might be less corrupt when in positions of power than comparable groups of men (traffic cops in Mexico City, for example), and more prone to spend on community projects like water and sanitation.⁶ For the most part, however, outside Kerala and some urban middle-class localities, women in India still tend to experience the political process, and more especially 'the state', second hand. They will often find men pushing ahead of them in queues to see a Block Development Officer. Their waiting times are longer. They very often see a representative of the state with a male relative or perhaps with a political broker (*dalaal*). All too often, they have to vote as directed by their husband. Or they are nominated to political office instead of being elected. Their sight lines to the state are hazy and/or distant (Corbridge, Williams, Srivastava and Véron 2005). Some of them are verbally harassed or otherwise humiliated. *Adivasis* also, when they are referred to as *junglees*, or even (in English) as 'primitives', by the *dikus* (outsiders) who dominate their lives. Alpa Shah (2006) has argued that Munda men and women in Jharkhand, India, participate in elections mainly to elect leaders who will keep the state away. Like poor people across the developing world they fear

⁵ Chattopadhyay, R. and Duflo, E. (2004) "Women as policy-makers: evidence from an India-wide randomized policy experiment" *Econometrica* 72 (5): 1409-43

⁶ See Moore (1999) cited in Swamy, Knack, Lee and Azfar (2001). Also Chattopadhyay and Duflo (op.cit.).

representatives of the state like the police and forest guards. Some also prefer to raise their voices through their traditional leaders.

Bottom line: poor people crave protection or security and hope for improvements in their livelihoods. They value being consulted if it leads to something tangible and positive. Expectations are formed from direct experience and with a view to the experiences of others. None of this means that poor and vulnerable people expect democracies to provide these benefits, or that formal democratic systems will always lead to democratic deepening. Nor can they distinguish easily between outcomes produced by governments and outcomes specifically made possible by the democratic process. Few of us can, except in the field of negative freedoms. It is hard to think counter-factually when information is missing. For example, a labourer in South Asia can't easily compare his/her position with that of a labourer in China. That said, there are occasions when poor people can weigh the costs and benefits of democratic politics, more broadly defined. Local spaces for participatory development – user groups and the like – provide one case in point, dealings with elected local officials another. Likewise, democracies which exclude the voices of poor people – perhaps because of a lack of competition, or incentives for the formation of pro-poor coalitions – will struggle to maintain the support of the poor unless benefits are supplied to them by some other route (for example, as supplicants of key political bosses).

II Under what circumstances can poor and politically marginalised people begin to demand participation and political voice, and be heard?

Taking part in elections, or taking command of important state institutions and resource streams, are not the only ways that poor people can use politics to their advantage. For the most part, the most distant or excluded populations of the poor cannot expect to achieve control over the state. Nor will they form rose-tinted expectations about the benefits of democracy or direct participation. But this doesn't mean they are without spaces of empowerment or lines of access to government resources. They might have other options in civil and political society, as well as through social mobilisations and the threat of unrest or armed rebellion.

Civil society options vary from country to country. We would not expect civil society to be dense or extensive in authoritarian regimes. There will be clear limits on what actions are possible, not least in terms of whose authority can be challenged. But these limits are not absolute. In China, for example, it has often been permissible for ordinary people to challenge corruption at the level of the local state. These challenges can even extend to Party officials, so long as the overall wisdom of the Party is not brought into question. The Party helps affirm its legitimacy by allowing challenges of this sort. In more democratic regimes the spaces of civil society are generally wider. User groups are common in areas like community-based natural resource management and micro-finance. Many of these will create spaces for participation by women, or other named groups. They also provide opportunities for rapid repeat plays in forms of democratic governance; far more so than is allowed for in most voting systems. Information is quickly built up linking expectations to experiences. In some cases, too, as for example in some systems of joint forest management or school oversight committees, poorer people are able to assess the costs and benefits of direct participation (Kumar 2002). Political settlements are often experienced by poor people within restricted spatial areas. Their lives are clearly affected by national education, forestry or policing policies. But their perceptions of the state and the political process are most often shaped by engagements with men and women working in what Joel Migdal (2001) calls the 'trenches' of the state, elected or otherwise. The decentralisation of authority, resources and rights matters a great deal in this context, both for good and ill. When poor people experience decentralisation in terms of more localised corruption they might turn away from the state. When they gain some control over local budgets, and/or can hold budget holders to account (perhaps through

freedom of information campaigns), support for government might be deepened. The right to hire and fire teachers is another decision that is highly valued by many poor people.⁷

Local level political settlements always interact with political settlements at other scales. Judith Tandler (1997) made this point very well in her study of primary health care provision in Ceara State, Brazil. Infant survival and vaccination rates were significantly improved by the deployment of well-motivated female health care workers in the Province. A necessary condition of the scheme's success, however, was the willingness of Brasilia to sideline local mayors who might have seen it as an attack on their powers. Likewise, the freedom of information movement in India has drawn hugely on the campaigning activities of rights-based civil society groups like the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) in Rajasthan. But it has also been empowered by a more activist judiciary sitting in India's Supreme Court and some State High Courts. In other cases, trade union campaigns against free trade agreements – as recently in Costa Rica - have been empowered by the willingness of Latin American countries to use referendums and other forms of direct democracy. The Inter-American Development Bank reports that, “Between 1978 and 2005, 35 popular consultations were held in 11 countries” (2007: 227).

It is possible that rights-based campaigns and trade union movements empower middle class voters and formal sector workers more than members of the ‘unorganised poor’. Partha Chatterjee argues that few people in the developing world have access to those realms of reason, civility and dispassionate justice that elite families might take for granted or bend to their will. It is, then, “unscrupulously charitable” to dangle before such people the blandishments of participatory development or democratic good governance. Nor does it make sense to seek the “consecration of every non-state organization as the precious flower of the associative endeavors of free members of civil society” (ibid.: 39).

A popular phrase in Brazil holds that, “To our enemies, the law; to our friends, everything!” (DaMatta 1991: 168). This is precisely the distinction that Chatterjee explores. In his view, the development industry is committed to concepts and practices - untutored participation, generalized morality, decent behaviour, the sanctity of the law, deliberative democracy - that have little meaning for ordinary people: those people who are required to get by in the dirty and complicated worlds of governmentality and political society. Worse, it demeans the efforts and achievements that these people might claim for themselves: the poll booths captured, the electricity lines tapped into, the police officer bribed, the land illegally occupied, the assumption of State power by ‘rough’ men and women like Hugo Chavez in Venezuela or Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh, India. Ordinary people are required to make their way in precisely those political societies whose dissolution is called for, perversely, in the agendas of good governance.

Or they can mobilize. Just as Chatterjee gives short shrift to civil society actions across the developing world, he also has little to say about collective actions by poor people. This is odd, for it is clear that mass mobilizations have been key vehicles for pressing claims by or on behalf of poorer people. Land occupations provide one case in point, with the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (the Landless Workers Movement) in Brazil claiming to be the largest social movement in contemporary Latin America. It currently has 1.5 million members in 23 of Brazil's 27 States, and has used land invasions to effect land reforms in favour of landless families. It is also well networked with other social movements in Latin America and has been an active force in the World Social Forum. Meanwhile, in neighbouring Bolivia, indigenous identities have been mobilized both within and without the socialist party (*Movimiento al Socialismo*) of President Evo Morales. In both these cases,

⁷ For discussion, see Veron et al (2006), Jenkins and Goetz (1999) and Narayan and Petesch (2001). For more on people's experiences of less formal spaces of rule – informal courts, etc – see IDS-DRC (2006).

mobilizations have taken place within a broadly democratic framework, but have worked to change the nature of democratic debates.⁸

Here too there are important lessons for policy makers. We have seen in Iraq and Afghanistan that the creation of new democratic spaces doesn't always work to produce liberal persons to fill them (Stewart 2007). Questions of identity and religiosity remain key in most settings, as they are increasingly key in North America and Western Europe. It can also be easier for political leaders to mobilize around the politics of identity than a more traditional politics of development. Laloo Prasad Yadav understood this very well when he ran the Indian State of Bihar. Changing the languages of politics mattered to his supporters, just as it matters to Morales and his supporters that Quechua and Aymara are put on a par with Spanish as languages of state. Democracy means taking seriously the preferences of a majority of the population. And this preference might be for *sharia* law, or for the Indianisation of the state. Tolerance, Partha Chatterjee (1994) reminds us, is a state of affairs where contending groups are not required to provide reasons for being different. But this can create problems when invitations to tolerance are not reciprocated. The notion that democracies provide guarantees against ethnic or other forms of violence is a facile one, as also is the assumption that all forms of democratic mobilization must strengthen the institutions of democracy. Mobilisations in favour of the rights of one community - Hindus in India, for example, Protestants in Northern Ireland - can lead to protracted assaults upon the rights of minority populations, both from within organized political parties and without (Appadurai 2006). The strengthening of democratic institutions that are protective of the rights of minority groups demands much else besides, including a less cellular conception of morality and a strong judicial system.

Bottom line: Poor and politically marginalized people can begin to demand participation and voice in a number of ways. In some cases these demands will be raised directly and individually, as in user groups, in local government offices, and even in elected assemblies. More often demands must be made indirectly and collectively, in part in recognition of the superior resources of politically enfranchised groups. Where collective action problems can be solved, and/or where other routes to voice are blocked, poor people might turn to social movements or even armed rebellions. Still others will exit, voting with their feet. More commonly, poor people will voice their concerns, and even a sense of their rights, as members of a named group in political society. The politics of political society might be more or less civil, and more or less sectional or even violent, depending on the broader balance of political forces. This in turn will be linked to particular configurations of governmentality and the structures of hybrid democracy. Donor support for key leaders in political society should depend on four things: (a) the character of rule provided (whether it is inclusive or violently sectional); (b) on the capacity of key brokers to deliver important outputs to poor people; and (c) on the possibility of poorer people learning to behave as rights-bearing citizens by engaging these brokers; and (d) the character and extent of alternative routes for raising the voices and concerns of poor people.

III What role do different actors (elites, business groups, the marginalized, etc) play in deepening democracy for development.

Poor and excluded people have never been gifted democratic forms of rule. They have had to fight for them, just as they have to continue fighting for forms of democratic deepening that might work in their

⁸ Leonardo Avritzer (2002) has argued – contra Chatterjee – that in Brazil and some other Latin American countries the prospects for popular participation in the public sphere are greater than in North America and Western Europe precisely because civil society movements formed outside the state and in opposition to authoritarian regimes. The nature of these social movements helped strongly to shape the democracies which finally were won (or won back) from different authoritarian elites. [I am grateful to John Gaventa for this prompt; see also Section III].

favour. Slow but important battles are being waged to devolve power and resources to local governments (thus increasing the surface area of the state), to improve downwards accountability mechanisms, to train previously marginalized actors for public office, to promote local-level mass public meetings, or to appoint ombudsmen to protect the rights of more vulnerable people.⁹ The role that different actors play in these processes of democratic formation and deepening can thus be expected to change sharply over time. They will also have regard for what is happening elsewhere in the region or world.

Economists and political scientists have recently started to give renewed attention to what Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson call the ‘economic origins of dictatorship and development’. The gist of their model is quite simple. Democracies are most likely to form: (a) where social unrest in non-democratic regimes is sufficiently strong that it cannot be bought off with “limited concessions and promises of pro-citizen politics” (2006: xiii); and (b) “when the costs of democracy anticipated by the elite are limited, so that it is not tempted to use repression to deal with the discontent of the citizens under the non-democratic regime. These costs may be high when inequality is high, when the assets of the elite can be taxed or redistributed easily, when the elite has a lot to lose from a change in economic institutions, and when it is not possible to manipulate the form of the nascent democratic institutions to limit the extent to which democracy is inimical to the interests of the elite” (ibid.: xiv).¹⁰

Thus specified, the first iteration of the Acemoglu-Robinson model is clearly too simple. It assumes there is a singular elite grouping facing a singular non-elite grouping. It also makes robust assumptions about how elites gather and process information on challenges to their power. There is not much space here for the cock-up theory of history advanced by AJP Taylor. But there is also more than a grain of truth in the Acemoglu-Robinson framework, and some important hints as to how and why we might think more clearly about democratic deepening. A first hint has to do with the importance of struggle and collective action. Rather oddly for a mainstream economist and political scientist, power is conceived firstly in absolute terms, so that the empowerment of the poor must in key respects come from the disempowerment of the rich. Democracies form when elites are forced to cede power to other groups, or when the costs of clinging to power become too great. Gandhi recognized this very well during the days of the Raj. He famously told the British that they would one day walk out of India. They would recognize that the costs of rule were too high. (What Gandhi could not have guessed in the 1920s was that the costs of Empire would be significantly raised by American actions in the 1940s. The US tied wartime loans to Britain to strong pressures for the dissolution of its empire. Sanctions against Ian Smith’s regime in Rhodesia in the 1960s and 1970s, and against apartheid South Africa, were meant to have a similar effect. External actors can play an important role in creating the conditions for democratic rule, and later, perhaps through donor support, in helping it to deepen and become more embedded in people’s daily lives).

But power is not only conceived in absolute terms. Acemoglu and Robinson recognize that elites might be persuaded to share and even expand their powers in combination with other social actors, including the organized poor. Whether they do or not will depend in part on the strength of the collective

⁹ For a review, see Manor (2004).

¹⁰ In an another important and much cited article, Acemoglu, Johnson and Robinson (2001) trace these patterns of rule and inequality to systems of European colonization that were significantly conditioned by local population densities, disease environments and natural resource endowments. Where colonisers felt able to settle permanently, AJR argue, and where extractive economies were not favoured, European-style systems of property rights were put in place that (much later) led to economic growth and ‘take-off’ (*vide* North America). Where settlement was sporadic or linked to extractive regimes to serve the colony, no such virtuous circles were set in motion. Institutions did not trump geography. In policy terms, perhaps the real lesson of AJR is that present-day systems of political economy in the global South are the prisoners, in large degree, of path dependencies set up centuries ago. Changing endogenous institutions, needless to add, is far more of a challenge for the donor community than overcoming what Jeffrey Sachs and others call ‘bad geography’ (Gallup, Sachs and Mellinger 1999)

actions/mobilizations raised against them, and the terms in which these groups advance their claims. Mobilisations made in the name of non-violence are sometimes harder to repress than armed forms of resistance, especially when the avowed aim of the mobilization is ‘freedom’ or ‘equality’. The idea that people of colour should not have the same voting rights as white people is no longer one that elite groups find easy to justify. The same might be said of gender discrimination at the ballot box. An essential isomorphism between men and women as individuals with basic (human) rights is presupposed today in most countries outside North Africa and West Asia. Extending the battle-lines to affirmative action policies in the workplace or political assemblies is an ongoing task, and one that will meet with resistance. Male power-holders still like to play the difference card: ‘we are bigger than you; those tasks are female tasks’, and so on. But one key lesson from India, say, or from Costa Rica in regard to divorce laws, is that important changes can be secured when concerted pressure is brought to bear on discrete issues of concern: political representation, equal wages legislation, divorce and alimony laws, sexual violence, reproductive health, and so on. Successful actions in any one of these areas will change the terrain of subsequent struggles. Substantive democracy – democracy in the polity, in the workplace, at home – is deepened bit by bit, gets written into law, and rarely proceeds without setbacks.

Lastly, Acemoglu and Robinson begin to suggest when and where elites might be prepared to share power. One way of reading their point (b) above is conservatively. Elites will lash out when their core economic interests are directly threatened. Struggles over natural resource rents in crisis states won’t end in compromise when contending parties are organized along ethnic lines and have easy access to cheap weapons. Nor will elites cede power easily in the face of movements threatening to confiscate their property or bank accounts. They will seek to hide their money offshore, buy off opposition leaders, change the constitution, and/or resort to dirty wars. Neither democracy nor stable states will emerge easily in these contexts.

There are areas, however, where it can make sense for elites to join in wider political coalitions that might include the poor. These can be within and without formal democracies. A case in point is when elite groups can’t easily escape the externalities generated by rapid economic growth. Polluted rivers and groundwater might not bother elites too much if they have access to private wells and bottled water. But urban air pollution is much harder to deal with. The costs are more broadly shared. The same might go for urban congestion, although there is always the danger that the shacks of poor people are bulldozed to make way for freeways or metros. Likewise for urban health initiatives, or urban crime. Gated communities and private health plans are two ways for elite groups to deal with these issues. But when the threat takes the form of a plague outbreak (as in Gujarat, India, in the 1990s), the prospects for a broader coalition being formed are greatly enhanced. Crises of this sort also open up spaces for reform-minded officials within government. The A-R model assumes a high degree of homogeneity in the perspectives and actions of elites and bureaucrats alike. In so doing, it neglects the key roles that can and have been played by the ‘handful of heroes’ once referred to by Arnold Harberger (1993). Strong-minded individuals can make a difference, so long as they are close to the right place at close to the right time.

And finally there is the question of economic growth itself. The promise of economic reform and liberalization is that growth rates are sufficiently enhanced that most or all households benefit, albeit not equally. Poor households are pulled out of poverty even as rich households get richer and widen the gap - as has been happening in India, China and Brazil. In these circumstances, too, what might broadly be called pro-poor (better, pro-growth) coalitions might be put together in acknowledgment of the fact that power and resources are not always indivisible or tied to zero-sum games. Pressure from the media and external bodies (the World Bank, for example), which talks up the positive sum benefits of globalization can be important here. By definition, however, such pressures are most likely to be brought to bear in countries (democracies or otherwise) where basic public goods are being efficiently

supplied, and where the state commands its territory. It is more difficult to envisage in a crisis-affected state.

Bottom line: Elites share power when they are forced to. How and in what ways they might share power will depend on the prevailing balance of political forces, on the calculations by contending groups of the costs and benefits of conflict and cooperation, and on the existence of reform champions within key circuits of power. Power sharing is unusual except when a stable coalition of the poor can be mobilized and made to hang together. Ideology and a sense of justice matter here. It further presupposes that elites cannot or will not resort to outright repression, and cannot win out wholly by duplicity or cooptation. Pro-poor coalitions will most likely form first around issues of common concern to elites and non-elites. Urban or regional public goods (security, disease mitigation, pollution) are a case in point. They generally deepen one step at a time, around specific issue areas, in and through the law, and not always cumulatively. Women's movements around the world have shown what can be achieved, and what is still being blocked. That said, most households have women in them, just as they might have children or old people. Sharing power with women, the elderly and children is very different from power-sharing between ethnic groups or between the rich and the poor, where rates of 'overlap or inclusion' are much lower. Finally, to the extent that democratic politics might be linked in some way to higher rates of economic growth, and indeed to forms of trickle-down economics, it is possible to believe that growth coalitions can be put together (as now in some reform-minded States in India) that will improve the welfare of most households.

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