Voting for Impunity: On the Conceptual Limits of Patronage Democracy

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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.