CHAPTER 8

DISEMPowering NEW DEMOCRACIES AND THE PERSISTENCE OF POVERTY

THANDIKA MKANDAWIRE

A country does not have to be deemed fit for democracy; rather, it has to become fit through democracy. This is indeed a momentous change, extending the potential reach of democracy to cover billions of people, with their varying histories and cultures and disparate levels of affluence (Sen 1999).

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter considers two simultaneous processes taking place in developing countries: (i) the adoption of orthodox economic policies during a period of growing awareness of the pervasiveness and persistence of poverty and (ii) the growing political empowerment of populations throughout the world through processes of democratisation. Over the last decade, international conferences, pronouncements by international organisations and bilateral donors, NGO campaigns and declarations made by national governments have brought the issue of poverty back onto international and national agendas. This follows decades in which poverty was displaced by excessive focus on structural adjustment and stabilisation. At the same time, significant steps have been made towards democracy in many countries. This wave of democratisation has highlighted the blight of poverty, because of the greater transparency in political and economic affairs, the political empowerment of the poor themselves and growing recognition that poverty impinges on democracy’s own prospects.

Until recently, it was assumed either that democracy was a luxury that poor countries could ill afford or that socio-economic conditions in these countries were not auspicious for the implantation of democracy. The emergence of democracies in social and economic conditions that had been ruled out by theories that insisted on a number of economic preconditions for the emergence of democratic government has led to new optimism about the prospects for democracy under widely divergent economic and social conditions. Unfortunately, however, it has also led to a view on democratic
consolidation that assumes an extremely voluntaristic character, overemphasising the role of political leadership, strategic choices about basic institutional arrangements or economic policy and other contingent process variables. The focus on political crafting of democracies has bred complacency about the possibility of consolidating democracies in unfavourable structural contexts. This chapter argues that both ideational and many structural impediments must be borne in mind when studying the consolidation of democracy in the developing countries. One such constraint is the predominance of economic policies that hamper democracies in their addressing issues of equity and poverty. The focus here is on the fact that new democracies have tended to be more orthodox than older democracies.

2. THE CENTRALITY OF GROWTH AND EQUITY

Much of the recent discontent with the new democracies and the consolidation process has been with respect to their institutional weaknesses, such as presidentialism, lack of horizontal accountability and persistence of “authoritarian enclaves” that at times hold democracies at ransom. This has led to a flurry of epithets such as “low-intensity democracies”, “exclusionary democracies”, “démocratie tropicalisée”, “delegative democracy” and “low-intensity citizenship”. The problems that these epithets highlight are often essentially procedural in nature. Yet they also point to discontent on the substantive issues of equity and material well-being. Amartya Sen observed that there has never been a famine in a democracy. This observation points to the ability of democracies to respond to extreme conditions. It does not, however, tell us much about the persistence of the everyday forms of poverty in many democracies. Among contemporary developing countries, democracies can be found among both the good and the bad performers in terms of poverty reduction (Table 1). This fact is addressed in the Human Development Report 2002 on deepening democracy in a fragmented world:

Now, 10 to 20 years later, democracy has not produced dividends in the lives of ordinary people in too many countries. Income inequality and poverty have risen sharply in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, sometimes at unprecedented rates…. Poverty has continued to increase in a more democratic Africa. And many newly democratic regimes in Latin America seem no better equipped to tackle the region’s high poverty and inequality than their authoritarian predecessors (UNDP 2002: 63).

Democracy per se does not eliminate poverty. It is rather the strategies of development that do, with the result that some of the best performers in the eradication of poverty have been authoritarian countries pursuing developmentalist and socially inclusive policies, while some democracies have been among the worst performers (such as India, Botswana, the Philippines and Venezuela). The best performers have been Sri Lanka and Jamaica. However, even the best do not compare with South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore, where the percentage of population below the poverty line is zero. Many of the new democracies are pursuing policies that are unlikely to address the problems of poverty. For developing countries where poverty is acute, the legitimacy of democracy cannot rest only on their procedures, but must rest on their performance as well. How the fight against poverty is pursued has enormous