

# Democracy and human security

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POLICY BRIEF

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## Summary

Human security (defined here as access to a minimum threshold of food, water, health care, shelter, education, and work) diverges from traditional notions of national or territorial security by placing the primary focus on the individual's freedom from want rather than a preoccupation with freedom from fear.<sup>1</sup> Despite earlier optimism that democracy would naturally lead to an increase in human security, existing data, in contrast to other security categories, reveal only a weak overall correlation between the strength of a country's democracy<sup>2</sup> and its levels of human security.

The evidence does suggest, however, a fundamental difference between more bureaucratic and institutionally strong regime types (whether democratic or autocratic) versus more patronage-based and institutionally weak forms of either regime type. Bureaucratic democracies are strongly associated with high levels of human security while patronage autocracies are associated with low levels. Human security results for institutionally weak or patronage democracies and bureaucratic autocracies are more mixed. Other evidence points to the importance of addressing power asymmetries, citizen participation, and rule of law when designing human development policies. It is imperative, therefore, that the international community focus both on supporting inclusive democratization processes and on strengthening transparent and accountable institutions capable of meeting basic human needs.

### About the Project

This policy brief is part of a series of papers on democracy, security, and violent extremism prepared for the Community of Democracies' Democracy and Security Dialogue. The project seeks to foster greater collaboration among democratic governments, donors, civil society and academics to improve security outcomes and create a more conducive environment for the strengthening of democracy around the world. For more on the project and related materials, including the final report, visit [www.brookings.edu/democracy-security-dialogue](http://www.brookings.edu/democracy-security-dialogue).

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## What the evidence tells us

In the past 15 years, the literature on the links between democracy and human security (as defined here) has grown, with a small, but expanding, number of quantitative and qualitative studies. In one of the seminal works of the field, Pippa Norris argues—and empirically demonstrates—that the traditional debates between “democracy-promoter” and “state-builder” theorists have been misguided.<sup>3</sup> Democracy-promoters argue that deepening democratic processes and institutions, through increased popular participation and government accountability, leads to greater human security.<sup>4</sup> State-builders, on the other hand, contend that strong institutions and bureaucracies that effectively protect the rule of law and property rights and fight corruption were the real drivers behind advances in human security due to their effects on long-term planning, increased efficiency, access to justice, and economic prosperity.<sup>5</sup> Instead, Norris proposes a unified theory, arguing that there is no trade-off between democracy and state capacity, but instead the two work together in solidifying human security.<sup>6</sup>

The unified theory provides the framework for a number of important findings. First, while the relationship between democracy and human security is very weak overall, democracies with strong bureaucracies have significantly and consistently higher levels of human security than autocracies built on patronage.<sup>7</sup> According to Brookings’s research measuring democracy and human “insecurity” (as defined by poor performance on measurable indicators of access to food, housing, health, education, and work), strong democracies in the global south are significantly less insecure (correlation coefficient 0.58) than strong autocracies in the global south.<sup>8</sup> Weak democracies and weak autocracies, however, exhibit no apparent correlation to levels of human insecurity; these range widely from Mozambique with a score of 83.8/100 on a human insecurity index (high insecurity) to Malaysia with a score of 6.7/100 (low insecurity).<sup>9</sup> A comparable study found that higher “quality of

government” (strong, impartial bureaucracies with low levels of corruption) is highly correlated with a host of positive human development outcomes.<sup>10</sup>

An alternative and more convincing explanation is that human security depends on the strength of state institutions. Norris’ analysis shows that bureaucratic democracies with strong institutions on average have significantly higher levels of human security than patronage autocracies with weak institutions.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the state of human security in hybrid regimes without strong characteristics of either democracy or autocracy is heavily influenced by the strength of their institutions. This means that in order to provide greater levels of human security, countries must strengthen those institutions responsible for meeting basic human needs in a transparent and accountable framework. Such institutions include social welfare organizations, auditing and oversight mechanisms, anticorruption tools, conditional grant assistance to low-income families, and strong schools, among others.

## Explanations

Traditional explanations of the patterns observed above, as summarized by Charron,<sup>12</sup> are centered in three main camps: democracy-promoters, state-builders, and structuralists:

1. Democracy-promoters argue that with stronger democratic institutions comes greater human security; Thomas and Wilkin, for example, argue that the fight for human dignity, personal autonomy, and civic participation is a fight for human security;<sup>13</sup>
2. State-builders argue that institutions, regardless of their democratic character, are the driving force behind human security because of their long-term effects; and

3. Structuralists argue that it is pointless to attribute human security to either regime type or institutions since both, and human security in itself, are results of structural factors such as culture and geography.

Later theories, however, have congregated toward more multicausal explanations, but still underline the important role that both democracy and institutions play. Norris, for example, argues that democratic institutions must be accompanied by an uncorrupt, competent, and meritocratic bureaucracy, guided by a strong rule of law, in order for a nation to see an increase in human security.<sup>14</sup>

To consider the effects of other factors on human security, Brookings's research team looked into how corruption was correlated with human security. They found a strong overall correlation between high levels of perceived corruption and low levels of human security. The findings showed that as corruption increases, human security decreases. When comparing the perception of corruption within executive, legislative, and judicial branches, perceived corruption in the legislative branch is less strongly correlated with low human security than perceived corruption in the other two branches. However, legislative corruption remains quite a significant variable.<sup>15</sup> The disproportionately negative effect of corruption on women versus men in their access to public services offers another important dimension to the corruption and human security nexus.<sup>16</sup>

The mechanisms guiding the highly fluctuating levels of human security among hybrid regimes deserve more attention, especially the role of institutions, bureaucracies, and patronage. Keefer and Vlaicu,<sup>17</sup> and Keefer<sup>18</sup>

argue that political parties in new democracies do not have "credible commitments" and therefore need to rely on patronage to garner support.<sup>19</sup> Patronage, in turn, promotes corruption, clientelistic public services, and weaker rule of law. Similarly, Bates<sup>20</sup> as well as Charron and Lapuente<sup>21</sup> argue that weaker democracies are driven by short-term demands, whereas weaker autocracies can focus on longer-term agendas and institution-building.<sup>22</sup> In practice, the above mechanisms can be seen, for example, in Africa where the principal sources of insecurity often are poor governance.<sup>23</sup>

The World Bank's recent *World Development Report on Governance and the Law* compiles the latest thinking and evidence to support the case for reform of political systems, governance, and the rule of law as key to tackling the underlying drivers of persistent underdevelopment and inequity.<sup>24</sup> The report emphasizes the importance of reducing power asymmetries, expanding citizen engagement, and strengthening the rule of law as critical drivers of change. "[E]nabling new actors to enter the bargaining space, ... changing the incentives of the actors involved, or ... reshaping their preferences and beliefs," can lead to better development policies "by bringing about new formal rules that reshape de jure power."<sup>25</sup> This key insight is reflected in Goal 16 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which promotes inclusive societies, access to justice for all, and accountable institutions as critical to achieving sustainable development. If one thinks of sustainable development in terms of human security, these findings directly reinforce the positive contribution that transparent and accountable democratic institutions and political and civil rights can make to promoting economic and social rights.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Though democracy is not strongly correlated to human security, there is compelling evidence that strong democratic institutions coupled with competent meritocratic bureaucracies lead to better human security outcomes. The international community should take these findings to heart when they consider how to support capacity-building of state institutions in their own and other countries. They should, for example:

**Help other democracies invest in accountable and transparent institutions.**

This is particularly true at early stages of development when, according to Norris, investments in state capacity are likely to yield better results than investments in democratic process for the long-term health of the nation.<sup>26</sup> Strong institutions facilitate greater access to public officials and accountability, which in turn improves the demand for and delivery of public goods and services like access to adequate food, housing, health, education, and employment.<sup>27</sup> Addressing unequal distributions of power in society is another key factor in improving human development policies and outcomes.<sup>28</sup>

- ➔ Specific actions should include increasing transparency and checks and balances in the budgeting process. Increasing public participation in social service delivery through public hearings, public involvement surveys, and focus groups will hold governments accountable for their actions and apply pressure on governments to respond to the needs of the public.<sup>29</sup>
- ➔ Establish anti-corruption mechanisms like regular, transparent auditing; stronger legal accountability for bribery; and increased legislative oversight.

- ➔ Public education on the availability of critical social services is also important, especially for women and other marginalized communities.

**Take human-centered and multi-stakeholder approaches that target assistance to localities with low human security levels.**

Since top down, one-size-fits-all approaches to human security are generally ineffective, emphasis should be placed on (1) working with local actors, civil society, and community leaders to identify the principal sources of insecurity in local communities, and (2) designing a human-centered development strategy to address specific aspects of their experienced human insecurity. This more “bottom up” approach can lead to specific plans that can be scaled up to the national level.

**Stress the importance of preparing for natural disasters and emergencies.**

Often communities go into “shocks” (e.g., rainfall or drought shocks in sub-Saharan Africa) when a disaster hits and fall victim to sudden reductions in human security.<sup>30</sup> The international community should provide tools and support to developing democracies to help prevent and prepare for crises in order to promote resilience and improve human security. This has the added benefit of reducing the likelihood of more hands-on responses from the international community later, which can be costlier and more dangerous.

## Endnotes

1. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development Report 1994* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).
2. References to the strength or weakness of democratic governance and human rights are derived from quantitative and qualitative assessments contained in three comparable indices of liberal and electoral democracy (V-Dem), civil liberties and political rights (Freedom House), and regime type (Polity IV). The term “hybrid regimes” refers to countries that fall in the category of weak democracy or weak autocracy, without specific regard to current trends forward or backward.
3. Pippa Norris, *Making Democratic Governance Work: How Regimes Shape Prosperity, Welfare, and Peace* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
4. Nicholas Charron, “When Democracy Is Not Enough—The Role of State Capacity and Democratic Governance in Promoting Human Security,” *International Studies Review* 16, no. 3 (2014): 485-88.
5. Ibid.
6. Pippa Norris, *Making Democratic Governance Work*.
7. Ibid.; “Brookings Working Paper on Democracy and Gender Equality and Security,” (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2017); Michael Ross, “Is Democracy Good for the Poor?” *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 4 (2006): 860-74; John Gerring, Strom C. Thacker, and Rodrigo Alfaro, “Democracy and Human Development,” *The Journal of Politics* 74, no. 1 (January 2012): 1-17.
8. “Brookings Working Paper on Democracy and Gender Equality and Security.”
9. Ibid.
10. Soren Holmberg, Bo Rothstein, and Naghmeh Nasiritousi, “Quality of Government: What You Get,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 12 (2009): 135-61.
11. Pippa Norris, *Making Democratic Governance Work*.
12. Nicholas Charron, “When Democracy Is Not Enough.”
13. Caroline Thomas and Peter Wilkin, *Globalization, Human Security and the African Experience* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1999).
14. Pippa Norris, *Making Democratic Governance Work*.
15. 0.48 with an R squared of 0.23. Brookings used V-Dem variables in the analysis of corruption correlated with human security. The V-Dem variables in our analysis are indices composed of the aggregation of several variables and other indices. It is important to note that surveys evaluate only the perceived levels of corruption because actual levels of corruption are impossible to detect.
16. United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), “Corruption, Accountability and Gender: Understanding the Connections,” *Primers in Gender and Democratic Governance* (2010): 7-9.
17. Philip Keefer and Razvan Vlaicu, “Democracy, Credibility and Clientelism,” *Journal of Law, Economics & Organization* 24, no. 2 (2007): 371-406.
18. Philip Keefer, “Clientelism, Credibility and the Policy Choices of Young Democracies,” *American Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 4 (2007): 804-21.
19. Nicholas Charron, “When Democracy Is Not Enough.”
20. Robert H. Bates, *Prosperity and Violence* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).
21. Nicholas Charron and Victor Lapuente, “Does Democracy Produce Quality of Government?” *European Journal of Political Research* 49, no. 4 (2010): 443-70.
22. Ibid.; Mancur Olson, “Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development,” *American Political Science Review* 87 (1993): 567-76.
23. Caroline Thomas and Peter Wilkin, *Globalization, Human Security and the African Experience*.
24. World Bank, *World Development Report 2017: Governance and the Law* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2017).
25. Ibid.
26. Pippa Norris, *Making Democratic Governance Work*.
27. Ibid.
28. World Bank, *World Development Report 2017*.
29. Government Finance Officers Association, “Public Participation in Planning, Budgeting, and Performance Management,” February 2009, <http://gfoa.org/public-participation-planning-budgeting-and-performance-management>.
30. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development Report 2016: Human Development for Everyone* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2016).