

Democracy and Freedom

Is democracy always good? Can too much democracy be dangerous?

Some considerations on Fareed Zakaria's book "The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad"

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The triumph of democracy in the former Soviet area led to the inane assumption that democracy would succeed everywhere else. Many observers downplayed the advantages that Central Europe had that other regions: high literacy rates, a long bourgeois tradition and exposure to the Western Enlightenment.

Thus policymakers were not prepared for elections that helped pave the way to mass killings in the Balkans, to new dictatorships in Central Asia and to chaos in Africa. As Fareed Zakaria explains in *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, "elections are not necessarily synonymous with constitutional liberalism: 'Democracy is flourishing; liberty is not.'"

Zakaria, defines constitutional liberalism as the "bundle of freedoms" that include the rule of law, the rights of free speech and religion and the protection of minorities. Such freedoms, he writes, require the limitation of power, although democracy can sometimes mean the accumulation of it by an electorate that is little more than a mob. Zakaria's complex argument is particularly relevant today, as the United States seems to have embraced the decision of democratizing autocratic countries in the Middle East.

Zakaria says: "The Arab rulers of the Middle East are autocratic, corrupt and heavy-handed. But they are still more liberal, tolerant and pluralistic than what would likely replace them. Elections in many Arab countries would produce politicians who espouse views that are closer to Osama Bin Laden's than those of Jordan's liberal monarch, King Abdullah."

It is, therefore, the circumstances of each Middle Eastern country that should dictate how far and how fast we push for democratization, and not western countries' ideological desires.

Elections often constitute the culmination of liberalization rather than its beginning. The United States will surely be at its best in the Middle East when it promotes the general principles of a free society, rather than when it seeks to interpret those principles too narrowly and legalistically by demanding elections when it is dangerous to do so. In a post-Saddam Hussein Middle East, Zakaria implies, truest allies will be patience and endurance. His target is zealotry and not democracy.

Democracy's mixed record in producing liberty is Zakaria's theme. He writes about Karl Lueger, the rabid anti-Semite who in 1895 was elected mayor of Vienna. The unelected Habsburg emperor, Franz Joseph I, refused to honor the election, an anti-democratic measure that furthered the cause of historic liberalism rather than impeded it. As the author shows, the rise of fascism in the first half of the 20th century was inextricable from the expansion of the democratic franchise: Hitler rose to power through a free and fair democratic election.

Because social and economic conditions in much of the non-Western world now approximate those of Europe between the wars, Mr. Zakaria is able to catalog a vast array of instances in which the electorate's will led to the retrenchment of liberty. In 1994 voters in Belarus overwhelmingly elected the extreme nationalist Aleksandr Lukashenko as their president. The recent crackdown on independent news media by President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia was sanctioned by the electorate in opinion polls. In 1998 Venezuelans elected as their president Hugo Chavez, the angry populist and cashiered army colonel who then eviscerated the legislature and the judiciary. And while Americans and Israelis despised the misrule of the Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat, the author points out that Arafat was "the only leader in the entire Arab world who has been chosen through reasonably free elections."

"The Future of Freedom," however, is no polemic against elections. Rather, it is a calm antidote to the fervency of those who want to force elections down the throat of every society, no matter what its particular circumstances and historical experience. As any foreign correspondent knows, there are all kinds and gradations of dictators. Saddam Hussein cannot be compared to Gen. Pervez Musharraf, whose coup in Pakistan in 1999 led to an attempt at "radical political, social,

educational and economic reform" that no elected politician would have dared. Nor can Lee Kuan Yew, who wrought an economic miracle in Singapore, be compared to another dictator, Robert Mugabe, whose thuggery and incompetency have brought Zimbabwe to the brink of famine and bankruptcy. Zakaria, far from extolling dictatorship, usefully reminds us of a complicated world that cannot be depicted as a Manichean divide between democratic and authoritarian.

"It should surely puzzle these scholars and intellectuals," Zakaria writes, "that the best-consolidated democracies in Latin America and East Asia -- Chile, South Korea and Taiwan -- were for a long while ruled by military juntas. . . . In almost every case the dictatorships opened the economy slowly and partially, but this process made government more and more liberal."

Nor did our own democracy spring from completely exalted ground. Zakaria notes that Western liberty was born of naked struggles for power. The Vatican, though itself reactionary, furthered the cause of individual liberty by competing with the power of the state so that the state lost its monopoly on ideas. There was also the dumb luck of geography: Europe's many rivers, mountains and navigable bays allowed for the growth of feisty, independent countries, in contrast to the flatlands of Asia, easily overrun and thus friendly to despotism. Earned wealth also helped the West. The rise of a bourgeoisie and private businesses weakened the state's centralizing power. The author nowhere denies moral will as a factor in liberty but writes that people of strong moral will exist in many places that are still not liberal, often because history, geography and economic conditions have not been propitious.

As for Iraq, Mesopotamia's flat geography, so friendly to conquest, as well as its ethnic splits and absence of public opinion (at least as we know it), would not make it seem fertile ground for democracy. Nevertheless, the nation's high level of education and relatively secular tradition should give us some cause for optimism. Who knows? Iraqis may turn out to be wise in the way of Eastern Europeans, who had experienced a similar despotism.