

Zakaria's Prophecy

Fareed Zakaria

**The Future of Freedom:
Illiberal Democracy
at Home and Abroad**

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Reviewed by Yuval Levin

Ours is the golden age of democracy. Whereas a century ago, the world boasted at best a handful of democratically elected governments, and not one that offered universal suffrage, today well over one hundred democracies dot the globe. In the past two decades alone, almost every state in Latin America and Eastern Europe has abandoned despotism and become a representative republic. And the trend seems to be continuing: In Freedom House's 2003 study of former Communist states, ten countries in Central Europe and the Baltics registered significant improvements in democratic processes in the space of a single year. Now that the United States and other

Western nations have committed themselves to bringing democratic institutions to developing countries, it is likely that even more nations will eventually follow suit, even in regions once deemed inhospitable to freedom. Indeed, President George W. Bush recently defined the post-war American missions in Iraq and Afghanistan as "transforming dictatorship into democracy and letting the people determine their own future."

This would seem to be a very promising development, but Fareed Zakaria, in *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, cautions against overstating its meaning. Our zeal for democracy, understood in its classical sense as the "rule of the people," may in fact come at the cost of liberalism, or the protection of the economic, political, and religious autonomy of individuals. This is a daring argument, particularly these days, and few people would risk making it so boldly. But Zakaria, the editor of *Newsweek International* and a former managing editor of

Foreign Affairs, is one of America's most creative and accomplished public intellectuals. A scion of the Indian political elite—his father was a leader of the Congress Party, his mother a respected newspaper editor—he is fully at home in the American political scene as well, and his admirers even hint that he may someday become the United States' first Indian-born secretary of state.

The Future of Freedom is an expanded version of a 1997 article published in *Foreign Affairs* that helped propel Zakaria to national prominence. Its contrarian thesis—that democracy is overrated, and can sometimes even undermine rather than advance the cause of liberty—is intriguing and at first glance quite attractive. It appears to promise an updated expression of Alexis de Tocqueville's emphasis on the importance of liberal mores and habits over elections, and of Edmund Burke's doubts about the leveling winds of democratic times. Yet when one begins to plumb the depths of Zakaria's argument, the flaws of the book emerge, seriously undercutting his thesis. His account of democracy makes sense in theory, but fails to convince in practice.

In his analysis of global democratization, Zakaria offers three basic contentions: First, that in assessing

foreign governments' legitimacy, we ascribe too much significance to elections; second, that democratic rule functions best if it is established following a period of stability and prosperity; and third, that in an effort to reach that interim stage, a liberal autocracy is preferable to an illiberal democracy.

With regard to elections, Zakaria warns that around the world, "democratically elected regimes, often ones that have been re-elected or reaffirmed through referenda, are routinely ignoring constitutional limits on their power and depriving their citizens of basic rights." He is surely right: There have been many free and fair elections that brought to power racists, fascists, and fundamentalists. For a current example, we need look no further than the challenge the West now faces in the Islamic world. As Zakaria notes, "We recognize the need for democracy in these often repressive countries. But what if democracy produces an Islamic theocracy or something like it?" The notion that elections, even relatively free ones, are a panacea for political and social dysfunction or a mark of genuine legitimacy has too often been proven wrong by history.

Particularly in societies long distorted by despotism, experiments in democracy have at times turned ugly. Algeria comes to mind, as does

Venezuela, which, under the rule of the democratically elected Hugo Chavez, has suffered from economic mismanagement, political corruption, institutional decay, and staggering levels of poverty, though just two decades ago its living standard was among the highest in Latin America. And of course, there is sub-Saharan Africa, in which 42 of the 48 countries have held multi-party elections since 1990, only to produce as much chaos and instability as before. In truth, the oft-expressed Western commitment to democratic values is really a commitment to liberal values; “One man, one vote” is not all President Bush has in mind when he speaks of a democratic Iraq or Afghanistan.

Zakaria’s second contention, however—that order and prosperity must come before democracy—is far more problematic. While this may seem sensible at first glance, it is no simple matter to figure out when a country is ready to move from orderly and prosperous authoritarianism to democracy. While it may be true, as Seymour Martin Lipset has argued, that “the more well-to-do a nation, the greater its chances to sustain democracy,” Zakaria proposes a somewhat crude method of determining when a nation is prosperous and stable enough to democratize. “One might conclude,” he writes, “that a country that attempts a transition to

democracy when it has a per capita GDP of between \$3,000 and \$6,000 will be successful.” He offers some exceptions—such as Arab states that have reached these levels through rent income on oil, but have not distributed the wealth broadly among the populace—but nonetheless argues that this rule of thumb has proven right in the past, and still makes sense today.

Just how, then, should less prosperous countries, which by Zakaria’s standard are not yet ready for democracy, go about obtaining the wealth and stability necessary for a transition? Here Zakaria stands ready with his third, and most controversial, contention: They would do best to be governed by a “liberal autocracy,” the firm but benevolent rule of a strongman committed to maintaining order and building up the economy. “In East Asia, as in Western Europe, liberalizing autocracies laid the groundwork for stable liberal democracies,” he writes. “In almost every case the dictatorships opened the economy slowly and partially, but this process made the government more and more liberal.” A liberal autocrat might afford the people some important personal freedoms, but would not ultimately be answerable for his policy choices. Zakaria has several examples in mind. His favorites are “Singapore’s brilliant patriarch” Lee Kuan Yew and

Pakistani ruler Pervez Musharraf, although he also credits Franco, Pinochet, and Suharto with paving the way for democracies in Spain, Chile, and Indonesia.

All these liberal autocrats, he argues, put in place the measures necessary to stabilize and liberalize their economies, and most introduced some individual rights and personal liberties that led (intentionally or not) to working democracies. According to this perspective, even the Chinese government's efforts to introduce economic reforms while resisting the pressure for democratization may be viewed favorably: "It is too easy to caricature them [the Chinese leaders] as trying to graft capitalism onto a fascist state," he writes. "They know that to introduce capitalism into China requires much more than economic changes, so they have allowed significant reforms of the administrative and legal systems as well.... The regime has even introduced open elections in some villages and allowed businessmen to join the Communist Party."

This liberal autocratic approach, Zakaria believes, may in fact serve a people far better than an "illiberal democracy," which can all too easily lead to ethnic wars, religious strife, economic disaster, and the collapse of social institutions. Indeed, all of the above have happened, Zakaria

claims, in those regions and countries which pursued democracy before liberalism: Russia, Venezuela, sub-Saharan Africa, the former Soviet Republics, pre-Musharraf Pakistan, and even his homeland, India. In Zakaria's view, while India has become more democratic in important ways, it has also "become less tolerant, less secular, less law-abiding, less liberal. And these two trends—democratization and illiberalism—are directly related."

But many of these examples do not quite hold up, and as the book progresses, one gets the impression that Zakaria is overreaching. A key example is the contrast he offers between Russia's efforts to democratize without introducing liberal economic and social policies, and China's efforts to liberalize without democratizing. "To oversimplify," says Zakaria, "China is reforming its economics before its politics, whereas Russia did the reverse." The picture he draws—of Russia's disorder and poverty in the midst of democratization, and China's prosperity in the face of continuing Communist rule—might have been compelling five years ago. Today's China, however, is hardly prospering, nor is Russia exactly floundering. Yet Zakaria makes no effort to explain why this is, and instead ends up offering a questionable defense of China's despots: We

should be glad there is no democracy in China, because the masses are more hard-line and anti-American than their rulers. "On a wide range of issues, from law and order to attitudes regarding Taiwan, Japan, and the United States," Zakaria writes, "the Beijing regime is less populist, nationalist, aggressive, and intolerant than its people." Of course, he concedes, it is difficult to measure public opinion in China, since "one ends up relying on the few surveys that the government allows, the bursts of public opinion in Internet chat rooms, good reporting by foreign newspapers, and other such indications. But surely," he concludes, "it is indicative that all these sources point in the same direction."

But is it? The Chinese people, in fact, subsist on a diet of government-fed propaganda that undoubtedly gives shape to their belligerent views. But more importantly, this sort of reasoning betrays a desire to make autocracy look responsible and democracy bad. Indeed, a certain soft spot for despots colors much of the book, as when Zakaria lavishly praises Pakistan's Pervez Musharraf for pursuing a path of "radical political, social, educational, and economic reform that even his supporters would not have predicted," and informs readers that he has been able to do these things "precisely because he did

not have to run for office." The trouble is, as Robert Kagan pointed out in his review of Zakaria's book for *The New Republic*, Musharraf's reforms are not liberal. The U.S. State Department describes Musharraf's human rights record as "poor," and Freedom House locates Pakistan in the "Not Free" category, designated for states that are neither democratic nor liberal.

Zakaria's other examples fare little better. The notion that the tragedy of Venezuela under Chavez is the fault of democracy is questionable. It is, more likely, an example of the failure of precisely the sort of elite rule that Zakaria prescribes for the developing world—as Chavez has placed more and more of the nation's economy under the control of central planning bureaucracies. Moreover, the idea that Chilean President Augusto Pinochet "did eventually lead his country to liberal democracy" ignores many salient facts of his reign, such as his responsibility for the death or disappearance of thousands of civilians in the years following his seizure of power in a coup, and conveniently fails to take account of Chile's democratic tradition before Pinochet's imposition of (an unquestionably more prosperous) order. And the claim that Indonesia under Suharto was a model of "order, secularism, and economic liberalization" would certainly be news

to many Indonesians, the vast majority of whom suffered in the late 1990s from Suharto's exploitation of the Indonesian economy for the enrichment of himself and his small group of courtiers.

With regard to the Arab world, Zakaria argues that pushing for democracy would yield only negative results: Because Arab political culture has no democratic tradition, it is extremely unlikely that the choices made by the populace would point in liberal directions. Far better, then, to accept the status quo: "The Arab rulers of the Middle East are autocratic, corrupt, and heavy-handed," writes Zakaria, "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."

This argument—that a benevolent strongman is far better than a populist election—is of course not new, and has been employed around the world by those seeking to impede the introduction of democratic reforms. As anyone who follows the Israeli-Palestinian conflict knows, this same argument—that if free elections were held in the Palestinian Authority, the winner would be Hamas—has helped

keep Yasser Arafat, the purported "lesser of two evils," in power. While in any given case the argument might potentially have some appeal, such claims too often end up lending support to the most repressive of regimes.

Zakaria's fundamental idea—that the trouble with the world is too much democracy—is impressive both for its boldness and for its potential to illuminate important yet often overlooked difficulties involved in spreading democracy. Yet his arguments do not actually substantiate his claim. This is most clearly the case in his extensive discussion of the problems of democracy in the United States, for which he reserves his most vehement criticism.

Zakaria takes up the state of American democracy in the book's final chapters, where he makes clear that his fundamental argument is not so much that democracy should wait for liberalism, but that democracy can at times work against the foundations of liberal society. In other words, even in America there is such a thing as too much democracy. In his view, this is precisely the situation that has characterized the United States in the last century. "The political history of the twentieth century is the story of ever-greater and more direct political participation,"

he explains. “And success kept expanding democracy’s scope. Whatever the ailment, more democracy became the cure.” Yet this trend “has produced an unwieldy system, unable to govern or command the respect of people. Although none would dare speak ill of present-day democracy, most people instinctively sense a problem.”

To Zakaria, the trouble lies with what he calls the “democratization” of American democracy, a process that has systematically eroded the public’s respect for the very institutions on which democracy is founded. Zakaria writes:

It might seem strange to speak of the democratization of a democracy, but the phenomenon is best described by that phrase. Since the 1960s most aspects of American politics—political parties, legislatures, administrative agencies, and even courts—have opened themselves up to greater public contact and influence in a conscious effort to become more democratic in structure and spirit. And curiously, more than any other, this change seems to coincide with the decline in standing of these very institutions.

Zakaria attributes a long list of popular complaints about the American political system to the phenomenon of increased democratization: The work of Congress, for example,

has been made more transparent, and is therefore more open to pressure from lobbyists and increasingly hampered by public posturing and petty factionalism. Political parties now use primary elections rather than small steering committees or caucuses to select candidates, which means that more irresponsible populists and fewer level-headed men of good conscience are elected to office. At every level, Zakaria argues, American politics has become more open to direct popular involvement, and less prone to follow the guidance of experienced leaders and wise old hands. On the whole, the change has not been for the better, and “almost everyone associated with these reforms—politicians, journalists, activists, scholars—believes they have made matters worse.”

This democratization has reached beyond politics, as well. Banks and stock markets have sought to attract middle- and lower-class customers, putting the American economy at the whim of countless small investors rather than in the hands of professionals, whom Zakaria sees as the imperial arbiters who alone are able to promote the general interests of society. Even American religion, he worries, no longer defers to the authority of the genteel Protestant clergy. Rather, it has been replaced by an unruly, evangelical Christianity, watered down

for mass consumption. “All it really takes to be a fundamentalist these days,” Zakaria concludes dismissively, “is to watch the TV shows, go to the theme parks, buy Christian rock, and vote Republican.”

Zakaria also worries that the fall of the old ruling class, with its ethic of duty, has put the nation at the mercy of fickle public opinion and cold market forces. American institutions have opened themselves up to what he calls “the great unwashed,” and the result has been the near-demise of responsible leadership. “Secure in their wealth or status,” Zakaria writes of the bygone elites, “these people tended to take a long-term—if proprietary—interest in the health of their town, city, or country. For all the elitism and privilege that accompanies such a world, American democracy was well served by public-spirited elites.” But no longer: “Today, when elites involve themselves in issues,” he laments, “it is entirely from a partisan perspective, often one related to some issue that affects them.”

Most of this yearning for the past is sorely overdone—one need only think of the “machine politics” that dominated American public life a hundred years ago. But Zakaria’s argument does draw upon a key insight: As American life has become

more democratized, power has not necessarily gone to the people. Frequently it has been distributed among a new, less responsible class of elites: Lobbyists, campaign spin-doctors, and their ilk, the people who know how to sell to the masses, yet are rather less interested in determining what is best for them.

Zakaria’s fundamental assumption is that the old patrician elite knew what was best and worked to achieve it, while today’s leaders are consistent failures. As a result, Americans are unhappy with their government, do not trust their representatives, and believe special interests have too much power. This is questionable on both counts. It is all too easy to mistake popular discontent in a democracy for an indication that the system is falling apart. It can be argued that Americans have never been very happy with their government, even at times that we consider to have been the apex of American civic life. We have always believed special interests were conniving to mistreat us. Indeed, it is precisely this skepticism that has proven to be an effective popular check on elected leaders. But surely “trust in government” is greater now than it was in, say, the 1960s, especially among the young.

Moreover, it is important to recall that the founding principles and

institutions of the American regime, as established in the United States Constitution, enjoy a much wider degree of consensus than those of almost every other country. While basic issues of sovereignty, national identity, and the distribution of power continue to challenge the democratic order in Europe, Canada, and elsewhere, it has been a long time since Americans seriously questioned the premises of their government. Zakaria describes an American politics in crisis—but is it really?

If the description is not self-evidently accurate, neither is his remedy self-evidently appealing. Zakaria knows, of course, that the old aristocracy will never return to power (and as an Indian-born Muslim living in America, he probably doesn't want it to). And while on the one hand he assures us that "in many, many ways democratization has been an extraordinary, powerful force for good, breaking up oligarchies, revolutionizing businesses, bringing in and rewarding fresh talent, creating new industries, and perhaps most important, empowering individuals," he writes that responsible decision-making can be accomplished only "by insulating some decision-makers from the intense pressures of interest groups, lobbies, and political campaigns—that

is to say, from the intense pressures of democracy."

Zakaria's argument, in essence, is that elections, the very mechanism that ensures government accountability, should be more limited in their effect, and a far greater degree of discretionary power given to a group of experts who are less answerable to public opinion. Not surprisingly, then, he claims that the American institutions that work best are those most distant from public control; his favorite examples are the Supreme Court and the Federal Reserve.

In keeping with his belief that the United States needs more apolitical governing bodies, Zakaria proposes an independent tax authority. For in his view, "The tax code has become time-consuming, complex, and expensive for a simple reason: Democratic politics." His proposal, based on a plan by Princeton economist Alan Blinder, would have Congress give the tax authority "broad directions and guidelines, and on this basis it would prepare tax legislation. Congress would then vote on the bill but no amendments would be allowed." This system, "although hardly flawless," would "undoubtedly produce a better tax code than the one we have now."

But this line of reasoning is too facile. The Federal Reserve is able to

“work” better than Congress because its task is essentially computational; it is charged with a responsibility that is almost entirely technical. Alan Greenspan’s job would be far more difficult if he had to write the federal budget. And it is hard to imagine how exactly the Supreme Court functions better than Congress—surely not by any measure that takes note of the court’s official responsibility to interpret the Constitution. While the everyday work of Congress is certainly messy and inefficient, it actually manages to function rather well in broad terms, and it is far from clear which among its faults might be mitigated by the introduction of an unaccountable tax authority. Moreover, it is precisely the factional, interest-driven debate that serves to ensure that our legislators, more than any other branch of government, are doing their best to further the interests of their constituents, thereby preserving the Jeffersonian principle that governments must derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. It is their very responsiveness that lends democratic legitimacy to the less representative, more elite institutions which elected representatives are involved in fashioning, such as the Supreme Court and the Federal Reserve.

There is another problem with Zakaria’s argument. While bemoaning

the intellectual depravity of the masses, he largely overlooks the intellectual corruption of the elites. Indeed, one might rightly argue that we should be grateful for the democratic pressures that ensure that crucial policy decisions are influenced by American public opinion. Despite years of relentless assault by its leading intellectuals and much of the press, the American public remains fundamentally sensible about a great many matters, both foreign and domestic. It accepts, for example, the heavy burden of America’s international responsibilities, instinctively sensing that European anxieties are largely misplaced. It supports Israel, and holds other views and attitudes that would not fare well in most university faculty meetings. Without a great deal of knowledge of the particulars, the public seems to have an intuitive sense of the right direction. Unfortunately, Zakaria overlooks this, and as a result ends up taking a sensible point too far. In arguing that democracy, in America and elsewhere, ought to be limited because the people do not know their interests, he grossly underestimates the wisdom of democracy’s subjects, and vastly overestimates the wisdom of its leaders.

At first one wants to see Zakaria’s charmingly bold thesis succeed, for many of the ills he describes are real.

But as the book progresses, the weakness of his evidence ends up bolstering the reader's confidence in the very democracy under assault. Zakaria's call for a more republican, less democratic democracy is a legitimate one, but his book ends up offering a program that is impractical and wrong.

In the end, liberal authoritarians are rather hard to come by, and does

anyone really want to be ruled by them? Democracy, for all its faults, is still the best political system around, and fundamental to any true liberal freedom, at home and abroad.

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