

Has Democracy Gone Too Far?
by Larry Willmore [word count: 727 words]

The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad, by Fareed Zakaria
(W.W. Norton, 2003, 256 pages, \$24.95)

The Future of Freedom is a difficult book to review, in part because the author hedges his bets. The book contains many fragments of wisdom, but it also conveys one Big Idea: the world suffers from excess democracy. In the words of the author, the book “is a call for self-control, for a restoration of balance between democracy and liberty. It is *not* an argument against democracy. But it is a claim that there can be such a thing as too much democracy—too much of an emphatically good thing” (p. 26). In the twentieth century, America fought to make the world safe for democracy. “As we enter the twenty-first century, our [America’s] task is to make democracy safe for the world” (p. 256).

The author begins by explaining that democracy and liberty are not synonyms: it is possible to have one without the other. Democracy is universal suffrage and majority rule. Liberty is freedom of speech and assembly, the right to own property and other human rights. A majority of an electorate can deny rights to minorities, producing an ‘illiberal democracy.’ And it is possible to have liberty without democracy in a ‘liberal autocracy’. In Western Europe it is a fact that liberty (freedom of speech, rule of law, and other human rights) predated democracy. For centuries, universal suffrage was not even a distant goal in liberal Europe, and it was common to deny voting rights to slaves, women, minority ethnic groups, illiterates, the indigent and those without property. A more recent example is Hong Kong, whose residents enjoyed liberty (rule of law) without voting rights, for the British Crown Colony was ruled by a Governor appointed in London.

Liberty trumps democracy, so liberal autocracy is preferred to illiberal democracy. But, how does one move from illiberal democracy to liberal government? Zakaria provides little guidance, other than recommending that government officials be appointed rather than elected to office. Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, writing in the 6 October 2003 issue of *The New Republic*, questions the wisdom moving away from electoral democracy:

“There is ... a genuine loss of political freedom and restrictions of civil rights in even the best-performing authoritarian regimes, such as Singapore or pre-democratic South Korea; and, furthermore, there is no guarantee that the suppression of democracy would make, say, India more like Singapore than like Sudan or Afghanistan, or more like South Korea than like North Korea.”

Zakaria seems to concur when he writes (p. 251) “In general dictators have not done better ... than democrats—far from it. Most dictators have ravaged their countries for personal gain. Scholars have asked whether democracy helps or hurts the economic growth of poor countries and, despite many surveys, have come to no conclusive answer.” Immediately, however, Zakaria adds “But over the past fifty years almost every

success story in the developing world has taken place under a liberal authoritarian regime. Whether in Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, Chile, Indonesia, or even China, governments that were able to make shrewd choices for the long term were rewarded with strong economic growth and rising levels of literacy, life expectancy and education.” He specifically admonishes India, which “for all its democratic glories ... has slipped further and further behind on almost every measure of human development”.

Zakaria assumes there is a trade-off between liberty and democracy: more liberty can be obtained by sacrificing democracy. In reality, liberty and democracy most often go together. Democratic governments tend to be more liberal, with more respect for human rights, than authoritarian regimes. This is not an accident, for democracy without freedom of speech and freedom of assembly is not an ‘illiberal democracy’, it is a sham democracy where elections are meaningless.

Zakaria ends his book acknowledging “democracy, with all its flaws, represents the ‘last best hope’ for people around the world” (p. 256). This statement is not controversial. Controversial are his claims that there is excess democracy in the world and that the best hope for developing countries is a ‘liberal autocracy’ to prepare them for democracy.

Fareed Zakaria is editor of *Newsweek International* and former managing editor of the influential journal *Foreign Affairs*. He was born in India, educated at Yale and Harvard universities, and writes well, with exceptionally clear, lively prose. This book is an expanded version of his seminal *Foreign Affairs* essay “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy” (November/December 1997).