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Book Review

by George C. Leef

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

One of the most annoying things that Americans have to put up with during elections is the rhetoric that sanctifies democracy. We are bombarded with admonitions to vote, with suggestions that there is something shameful in not “participating in our democracy.” I have even heard the statement that voting is “our most precious right.” No doubt about it: democracy is a fantastically overhyped idea.

It takes some intellectual acumen to see through all the adulation for democracy and ask whether it is always desirable. In his most recent book, *The Future of Freedom*, Fareed Zakaria does exactly that. The subtitle of the book tells the reader what the author has in mind. Democracy is often very illiberal in its workings. That is to say, democratic decision-making frequently leads to authoritarian outcomes.

Far from being a guarantor of freedom, or even the same as freedom, as many young Americans are taught, democracy can be freedom’s worst enemy. That is a contrarian message that libertarians have been trying to get through to people for many years and it is welcome to have a clearly “establishment” figure saying it. (Zakaria is a columnist for *Newsweek* and a political commentator for ABC News.) Although the book doesn’t hit on all cylinders, it succeeds in showing that democracy is not always a good thing and that we would be better off if we could halt the trend toward making all processes and institutions more democratic.

Zakaria’s crucial insight is that democracy is only a means, not an end in itself. The Founders of our nation wanted to ensure the protection of liberty and property and chose to make a highly restricted form of democracy one of the means toward that end.

It is quite possible to enjoy the rights of liberty and property without democracy, Zakaria argues, and similarly possible to see those rights destroyed under a perfectly operating democracy. As he states the matter,

For people in the West, democracy means 'liberal democracy': a political system marked not only by free and fair elections, but also by the rule of law, a separation of powers, and the protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion, and property. But this bundle of freedoms — what might be termed “constitutional liberalism” — has nothing intrinsically to do with democracy and the two have not always gone together, even in the West.

He adds that “democracy is flourishing; liberty is not.” Truer words could not be written.

After a thought-provoking introductory chapter on the history of liberty (which Zakaria argues is rooted in the competing power centers of the Catholic Church and the numerous feudal states of Europe, competition that created the “nooks and crannies” where liberty began to thrive), the book launches its offensive against the notion that democracy is necessarily a good thing. Zakaria's examples are illuminating.

For example, the Vienna of the 1870s was noted for its cosmopolitan liberalism. But during the 1880s, voting rights were greatly expanded, leading to the election in 1895 of Karl Lueger as mayor. Lueger was a precursor of Hitler, a nationalist who appealed to the poorly educated (and now enfranchised) masses with anti-Semitism and socialism. Had it not been for the fact that the Austrian emperor invalidated Lueger's election, perhaps the Nazi movement would have originated in Austria and spread to Germany, rather than the other way around. In any event, the episode shows that making a society more democratic can at the same time make it hostile to freedom.

A more recent example is Indonesia. Zakaria shows that under the dictatorial rule of Suharto, the nation was politically stable and making steady economic progress, but after becoming democratic in 1998,

gross domestic product has contracted by almost 50 percent ... pushing more than 20 million people below the poverty line. The newly opened political system has also thrown up Islamic fundamentalists who, in a country without much of a political language, speak a very familiar discourse — that of religion.

Zakaria fears that the nation will slide into chaos and Islamic radicalism, a case of replacing a corrupt dictatorship that at least provided a semblance of the order that capitalism needs with an illiberal democracy that will turn the country into a basket case.

And why did Indonesia suddenly become democratic? It was because the United States and the International Monetary Fund insisted on it as a condition for receiving assistance during the East Asian financial meltdown.

Democracy and liberty

And now we come to one of Zakaria's most telling points. The U.S. government has been so fixated on democracy that it has been eagerly promoting it around the globe. U.S. politicians and State Department officials have linked eligibility for aid to democratic "improvements" within the recipient nations. (Zakaria, unfortunately, seems to have no objection to the aid. He just wishes that the United States would stop demanding that countries make democratic reforms as a condition of receiving the assistance.)

Consequently, we find many nations in Africa, Asia, and South America that have become more democratic in recent years, but have simultaneously become less free. "What you end up with," the author writes, "is little different from dictatorship, albeit one that has greater legitimacy." Struggling nations need the rule of law and respect for individual rights — constitutional liberalism — far more than they need democracy. Yet the U.S. government has been mindlessly pushing democracy on them.

The move toward ever greater democracy is also evident within the United States and Zakaria does not like what he sees:

Founded as a republic that believed in a balance between the will of the majority and the rights of the minority . . . America is increasingly embracing a simple-minded populism that values popularity and openness as the key measures of legitimacy. This ideology has necessitated the destruction of old institutions, the undermining of traditional authority, and the triumph of organized interest groups, all in the name of "the people."

Congress, for example, is more democratic than it was 40 years ago, but Zakaria maintains that it is consequently more open to special-interest group pressures. The author also has strong words for the spread of direct democracy — that is, ballot initiatives and referenda. Those processes, he says, give us "a jumble of laws, often contradictory, without any of the debate, deliberation, and compromise that characterize legislation."

Zakaria's solution is to move toward more decision-making that is not democratic, and therefore not as susceptible to short-sightedness and special-interest pressure. He admires the Federal Reserve, for example, because it is insulated from democracy.

This part of the book is not well thought out. The problem we face in the United States is not that the American people are making too many political decisions democratically, but rather that they are making too many political decisions. We need to return to the constitutional liberalism of our early years, but I doubt that deemphasizing democracy in our political institutions would make much difference. Many of the most authoritarian government mandates now come from unelected individuals who face no democratic pressures — bureaucrats. The

Congress of old was less democratic, but it still passed a lot of terrible legislation. Even if we could ratchet down the level of democracy as Zakaria wants, it's hard to see that it would halt the erosion of our liberties, much less restore those that have been lost.

I'm afraid that Zakaria has lost sight of the goal (or at least what I think should be the goal), namely, a restoration of constitutional liberalism. Merely tilting a few degrees away from hyper-democracy will not suffice. The move towards democracy is a symptom of a deeper problem, growing statism. Americans now insist on making more and more decisions by government rather than allowing individuals to choose for themselves. I don't really care whether I'm compelled by a law passed in a not-too-democratic Congress that I must participate in Social Security, or compelled to do so because of a perfectly democratic ballot initiative. Either way, government coercion reduces my liberty.

The disappointment of *The Future of Freedom* is that it so clearly makes the point that democracy is no guarantor of liberty, but then fails to offer any guidance on how it might be guaranteed. A slight de-democratization of the intrusive and overbearing state is like tossing a toothpick to a drowning man.

*George C. Leef is the book review editor of **Ideas on Liberty**.*

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