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Defending Democracy: Why Democrats Trump Autocrats

John Shattuck and J. Brian Atwood

From Foreign Affairs, March/April 1998

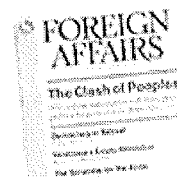
Summary: In "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," Fareed Zakaria suggests that enlightened autocrats are better than benighted democrats. He's wrong.

Fareed Zakaria observes that an increasing number of democratically elected governments are abusing their powers and repressing civil rights ("The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," November/December 1997). He contends that instead of promoting elections, U.S. policy should concentrate on consolidating existing democracies that respect civil liberties, the rule of law, and a separation of powers between government institutions. Proclaiming constitutional liberalism to be a necessary precondition for "liberal democracy," Zakaria asserts that without it, elections will inevitably lead to what he calls "illiberal democracy," bringing extreme nationalism, ethnic conflict, and war. He proposes that instead of coddling illiberal democrats, the United States should endorse "liberal autocracies" in less developed nations-governments that, though not democratically elected, respect individual rights.

There are three flaws in Zakaria's argument. First, he mischaracterizes current U.S. democracy assistance, suggesting that it is aimed only at promoting elections. Second, he downplays the political repression of seemingly benevolent autocratic regimes. Third, he relies on questionable evidence to demonstrate that democratization exacerbates rather than reduces social tensions.

OPEN IS BETTER

Over the last decade, indigenous forces in Central Europe, Latin America, and parts of Africa and Asia have succeeded in pressuring their governments to democratize by demanding more political rights, less arbitrary rule, and free elections. U.S. diplomacy and assistance programs have supported this process, promoting not only elections, but also the creation of legislatures, judiciaries, executive agencies, independent media, trade unions, and a plethora of nongovernmental organizations (NGOS). In fact, the United States Agency for International Development, the primary U.S. vehicle for funding democracy promotion, spends less than 25 percent of its democracy funds on elections.



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U.S. democracy assistance helps governments and NGOs in Africa, Central America, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Haiti, and elsewhere to institutionalize the rule of law and foster greater respect for human rights, which means building independent judiciaries and public support for their role. These and other institutions are essential to safeguarding basic freedoms, protecting ethnic and religious minorities, promoting decision-making according to rules rather than by fiat, and providing social stability and reliable methods of dispute resolution.

U.S. democracy-promotion policy is based on the realistic premise that in today's global market, open societies with democratic governance have the best chance to produce stable and equitable economic development. But Zakaria argues that because liberal autocracies are insulated from interest-group politics, they have greater freedom to act on behalf of economic development than democracies. Enlightened autocrats are purportedly able to ignore short-term interests in favor of the long-term welfare of society as a whole. They can pursue the disciplined fiscal and monetary policies needed for sustained economic growth. It is certainly true that some autocratic regimes, particularly in Asia, have produced impressive economic gains, but the current Asian economic crisis underlines the need for greater transparency and openness in these societies as a bulwark against corruption and economic mismanagement.

Political pluralism, including a free press and a political opposition, generates more and better information for use in economic decision-making. Consider, for example, economist Amartya Sen's research on government responses to economic calamities such as drought. According to Sen, democratic governments are better than autocratic governments at mitigating the effects of drought because they are open to receiving negative information and political pressure to respond with appropriate policies. One need only compare the modest economic effect of the recent drought in democratic Botswana with the famines that occurred under similar circumstances in Sudan and North Korea to verify this observation.

Democratic competition can also increase the incentive for officials to resist corruption. Facing regular elections, an organized opposition, and a free media, political leaders in democratizing societies have less room for wheeling and dealing. In addition, the legitimacy that elected leaders gain through the democratic process enables them to appeal to the electorate to endure the temporary hardships brought by economic reform. Many of the current economic problems in East Asian countries stem from a lack of government accountability and transparency in the management of banks and other financial institutions. Not surprisingly, Thailand and the Republic of Korea, with their increasingly democratic cultures, have begun to embrace the reforms needed to address these problems. Indonesia, with one of the least open political systems in the region, was initially reluctant to reform.

Zakaria greatly underestimates the high costs of authoritarianism. Examples abound. Poverty has skyrocketed under Burma's military junta, and autocratic leaders such as Ferdinand Marcos and Mobutu Sese Seko presided over economic decline and egregious maldistributions of wealth. While better

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than these regimes, Zakaria's liberal autocrats look liberal only in comparison with the totalitarian rulers that preceded them. The abuse of human rights and repression of political choice make these autocracies poor alternatives to governments committed to democratization. Of course, emerging democracies are far from perfect, but as messy and complex as the growth of democratic culture is, the United States should be more willing to err on the side of those who are struggling for democracy than to throw in its lot with autocratic leaders who are likely to abuse their powers.

#### ROADS TO DEMOCRACY

Equally fallacious is the claim that democracy develops from some preconceived formula, with one ingredient preceding another. Zakaria's view that the development of constitutional liberalism must come before electoral democracy simply ignores the facts. There are many countries in which representative government predated the protection of civil and political liberties. South Korea and Taiwan are recent examples. The related argument that economic development must precede democracy ignores the fact that many countries, from Costa Rica and Poland to the Philippines and Botswana, have found that the road to democracy also leads to economic prosperity. The successful democratic transitions in African nations such as Benin, Mali, South Africa, and Namibia further demonstrate that neither a tradition of equal opportunity nor widely distributed wealth must come before political freedom. In short, political liberalization, economic development, and the protection of human rights are all tied together. For this reason, U.S. policy addresses them simultaneously, not in sequence.

Finally, Zakaria and others have contended that without constitutional liberalism, electoral democracy invariably leads to ethnic strife. This argument is belied by the effects of electoral pluralism in providing a safety valve for ethnic differences in many central and east European states and the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union. By the same token, some degree of pluralism and more moderate leadership have resulted from the series of elections in Bosnia over the last two years. In fact, in January 1998, Milorad Dodik, an avowed moderate with Western sympathies, was elected prime minister of the Bosnian Serb Republic. Elections have also allowed Bosnian Serb President Biljana Plavšić to stake out more moderate positions, breaking with the Pale leadership. Opposition parties have won as much as 30 percent of the vote in municipal elections, a sign that the extreme hard-line nationalists loyal to wartime Serb leader Radovan Karadžić are losing ground.

Democratization is a long and complex struggle, constantly marked by advances and setbacks. Elections, of course, are only part of the process of developing democratic culture, and they are certainly not a panacea for societies torn by conflict or countries wracked by poverty or economic crisis. But this does not mean that the United States should pull back from efforts to promote elections abroad; rather, it means that it should provide long-term assistance, in a wide variety of ways, to foster the growth of civil society, basic freedoms, the rule of law, and democratic culture wherever they have a reasonable chance of taking hold. Building democratic culture and