

APOLOGIST FOR AUTHORITARIANS

Fareed Zakaria's Illiberal Proposal

Reviewed by Marta Vanduzer-Snow

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

Fareed Zakaria

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The latest book by Fareed Zakaria, editor of *Newsweek International*, cautions readers about the dangers of unregulated democracy. *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* is a work that attempts to distinguish between the linked concepts of democracy, constitutional liberalism, and freedom. However, Zakaria's book falls in line with his conservative predecessors whose work has supported the predominant political realities of their time. Ultimately, Zakaria's work supports and legitimizes the offensive realism that characterizes present U.S. foreign policy.

Domestically, Zakaria's work encourages a new direction for American democracy. He correctly identifies flaws with the U.S. political system prior to the introduction of primaries. Eleven states hold primary elections in order for the Republican and Democratic parties to select delegates to the national nominating convention. Zakaria explains that before the primaries were introduced, candidates and platforms were selected by "tightly controlled party hierarchies." Primaries allowed voters to select the candidates, changing the function of parties to reflect marketable

candidates instead of candidates who reflected their party.

Zakaria proposes “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” in order to “temper narrow interests and short-term perspectives.” He suggests a delegated democracy, “exercised by people interested and experienced in public affairs and still accountable to the people.” This position seems problematic, given his admission of the faulty way elections were handled prior to the introduction of primaries, which were designed to preserve for the people more control over election choices.

The problem with Zakaria’s prescribed delegation is that this would create the problems the system of holding primaries was designed to address; in the past, delegating officials created an elitist system that was out of touch with the electorate. Would not the party hierarchies determine the delegates and the issues they would address, creating a new kind of elitist system? According to Zakaria, America had had experience with delegated presidential candidates creating an elitist system, but he fails to explain why an increasingly delegated democracy would overcome its flawed history and succeed now.

Zakaria’s analysis of the evolution of American democracy lacks a substantive position. He states, “Most representatives and senators believe that they operate in a political system in which any serious attempts at change produce instant, well-organ-

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ized opposition from the small minority who are hurt by the change. And it is these minorities who really run Washington.” His proposed system is designed to correct that problem. But in this system, wouldn’t the lobbyists and the minority interest groups he refers to simply exercise even more control over the delegates? Without the primary system, the delegates would be more shielded from public view and accountability and would be more susceptible to special interests. A more informative text might have broken down the votes in our current system, and demonstrate how these interests groups affect legislation. The reader will not find charts showing how these interests groups voted, nor does the author provide a table showing how much money they donate to each politician, or any corollary evidence that would demonstrably prove that these minorities are running Washington. These self-interest groups cannot all be supporting the same issue, and Zakaria does not account for how legislation is decided when these special interests have conflicting positions.

Zakaria comments on the new elite of American society, claiming that it is

now an insecure class. This seems doubtful, considering that the rich have plenty of money with which to promote themselves, and their children are socialized in the appropriate circles, ensuring continuation. Moreover, it is these elites who will be selected, or who will have the opportunity to be considered, as delegated officials. How will the American masses accurately determine whether or not these insulated elites, under Zakaria's proposal, are truly representing their needs? He astutely maintains that "parties are the mechanism through which people in modern societies express, reconcile, and institutionalize their moral and political values." If he accepts the party's role as such, then why would he suggest delegating and insulating officials?

Impressive, though Flawed, Regime

Zakaria turns to the international scene with a comment on Indonesia's General Suharto, who "was running a flawed regime but one that had achieved order, secularism, and economic liberalization—an impressive combination in the Third World." Suharto seized power in 1966 and ruled Indonesia until 1998. His regime was known as the "New Order," and many claim the General to be synonymous with modern Indonesia. Human Rights Watch estimates the number of people killed during Suharto's reign range from a quarter of a million to over one million. When Zakaria merely states that his regime was "flawed," and does not highlight that the economic growth he refers to was accompanied by the death of hundreds of thousands and that it did not dramatically raise the standards of living for the majority of the population, Zakaria casts a dangerously positive light on Suharto's reign. Suharto's reign marks one of the worst killing sprees in modern times. Using only the word "flawed" desensitizes the reader and draws insignificant attention to the harsher aspects of Suharto's regime.

Amartya Sen, an Indian scholar who won the 1998 Nobel Prize in economics, addresses the irresponsible approach of scholars like Zakaria in his essay "Human Rights and Asian Values." He refers to them as those who propose "a different line of justification that argues for authoritarian governance in the interest of economic development in Asia." Sen draws a more apt conclusion, using India as the case study, which demonstrates that a "friendlier economic climate, rather than a harsher political system" would generate economic growth, a growth that was not synonymous with the death of many innocent civilians. Interestingly, when Zakaria's work refers to democratic India he turns to former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her pursuit of "populist policies that were often unconstitutional and certainly illiberal." He neglects to discuss the ways in which she actually upheld and strengthened the Indian democratic tradition. Indira Gandhi seized power and declared a state of emergency in an immensely volatile time. She later, when the political realities permitted, stepped down and called for elections to, in turn, run as a civilian. Despite declining voter turnout, which reflects difficult times in both the domestic and international spheres, India, not Indonesia, should be seen as a sign of hope.

Much as Samuel Huntington's work supported or reflected the actions taken

by American administrations of his time, Zakaria's work supports the Bush Administration and their unilateral and imperialistic war. He says that "were the United States to dislodge Saddam and—far more important—engage in a serious, long-term project of nation-building, Iraq could well become the first major Arab country to combine Arab culture with economic dynamism, religious tolerance, liberal politics, and a modern outlook on the world. And success is infectious." Zakaria's denunciation of Saddam Hussein reads right out of Bush's speech that prepared the nation for the war in Iraq. The sentence, "alone among modern dictators, Saddam has used biological weapons against his own people (the Iraqi Kurds)" seems all too familiar. *The Guardian's* Julian Borger reported that officials often omit that the gassing of the Kurds occurred at a time when the U.S. was assisting Iraq and that Donald Rumsfeld once visited Baghdad in a friendly capacity as a Middle East troubleshooter. The U.S. lent its support to Baghdad during the Iran-Iraq war for fear of a rise in Shi'ite militancy. Rumsfeld met with Saddam Hussein in Baghdad to inform Saddam of U.S. willingness to help his regime and to restore full diplomatic relations at a time when Washington knew Saddam was using chemical weapons "almost daily" against Iran. In 1983, "Ronald Reagan signed a secret order instructing the administration to

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do 'whatever was necessary and legal' to prevent Iraq losing the war." Mr. Rumsfeld has said that he "cautioned" the Iraqi leader against using banned weapons, but the State Department notes of the meeting do not corroborate that story.

Informed estimates say that from 1983 to 1988, Iraq received \$34 billion dollars in aid; U.S., Germany, and France provided half of this aid and half came from the Soviets. Furthermore, a 1994 congressional inquiry discovered that U.S. companies, under license from the Commerce Department, had shipped dozens of biological agents, including various strains of anthrax, to Iraq in the 1980s. But Zakaria's work chooses to justify Iraq's selection by stressing that historically "Iraq was one of the most advanced, literate, and secular countries of the region," and thus a good candidate to be a strong democratic role model in the region.

All this is not to say that Zakaria's work in its entirety lacks insight. Significantly, he maintains the current need to emphasize the importance of, and clearly define, constitutional liberalism. However, in the same instance, his failure to stress the draconian nature of Suharto's regime suggests that the brutality of a given government is inconsequential for Zakaria when quantifying its success. His strongest point is the relationship he identified between a state endowed with vast natural resources and their investment in the peoples of that nation: "In a country with no resources, for

the state to get rich, society has to get rich so that the government can then tax this wealth.” This conclusion would assist U.S. foreign policy makers that deal with corrupt developing nations who have an abundance of natural resources. In the place of military assistance, the U.S. should use their funds to promote education and standards of health.

America should not continue to show indifference towards despotic regimes. The U.S. should insist that countries have accountable and transparent governments that maintain essential standards of living for their citizens as a precondition both for assistance and for international participation. Assisting regimes that do not respect human rights, as defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is irresponsible and endangers the citizens of those nations.

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