

Should We Hope That the World Will Become More Democratic?

Written by Antonio Ribeiro

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ANTONIO RIBEIRO, MAY 25 2013

Defining democracy is imperative in approaching this question. Taken literally, democracy means people's power, best described as a 'doctrine that the numerical majority of an organized group can make decisions binding on the whole group and people choose between competing parties to form an accountable government' (Hawksley, 2009: 2). Zakaria (1997) echoes the importance of elections to the definition of democracy, but posits a minimalist definition that avoids the tendency to glorify democracy as a 'badge of honour' guaranteeing civic, political and religious rights. Linz's (1978) expectation that political democracy should grant equal opportunities throughout society justifies Zakaria's observation. This essay will strictly take democracy to mean elections and accountability (Diamond, 2003: 29), in order to narrow down the broad scope of democracy.

'Hope' implies a passive approach to the extension of democracy. However, we must also address the possibility of a more active approach. Moreover, is there a need for established democracies to be further democratized, or is it just a question of preventing other types of regimes? If so, does that necessarily mean we should wish for more democracies or just actively discourage despotic governments? This essay will argue in line with Churchill's assertion that democracy is 'the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time' (Hawksley, 2009). Accordingly, this essay hopes the world will become more democratic. By way of validating Zakaria's (1997) seminal work on illiberal democracies, the relationship between economic growth and democracy and democratization, I aim to illustrate that there is no simple answer to examining the likelihood of more democracy. This question encourages a one-sided, Western view on whether 'we' see wider democracy as beneficial; however, this essay will consider the viewpoint of developing countries on more elections. The two next paragraphs explore the implications of Zakaria's work, namely the suggestion that elections are essential, and secondly, that perhaps a system of liberal constitutionalism is sufficient to ensure order.

Zakaria refutes the assumption that democracies and good governance are synonymous. He endorses what he calls 'illiberal democracies' on the basis that a democratic deficiency can be compensated by expanding strong liberal constitutional rights – concepts he argues, are historically and theoretically distinct (Zakaria, 1997: 1). Zakaria's disillusionment with democracy derives from his view that holding the vote is insufficient in protecting civic rights and freedoms. The power and legitimacy bestowed upon governments by electoral approval can be manipulated as justification for poor governance (Carothers, 2002: 8). (Everson, 1996: 1292) argues that an expansion of democracy threatens to facilitate demagogues and despotic governance. In 2006, Hamas, widely considered to be a terrorist organization whose primary aim is to eradicate the Israeli state, was democratically elected in Palestine (Hawksley, 2009: 119). This has two implications. Firstly, one fears to think what a greater degree of democracy would do in cases such as these – perhaps more democracy will push the equally suspect Hezbollah from having representatives in parliament to forming an outright majority in Lebanon. Secondly it suggests that democracy, as a regime type, does not impose rigorous enough restrictions on state power. A corrupt, short-sighted and unrepresentative government is inadequate to say the least, but these characteristics do not make them undemocratic. As such, an extension of democracy, contrary to popular belief, fails to address the issue of misrule. For instance, one in five ministers elected to the Indian parliament in 2004 had court cases pending against them for a variety of serious crimes (Hawksley, 2009, 160). The empowerment of criminals in India through the vote indicates that unpredictable, undesired effects emerging as a result of elections are not exclusive to the Middle East. The conclusion to be drawn

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is that 'illiberal democracies gain legitimacy and thus strength, from the fact that they're vaguely democratic' (Zakaria, 1997: 15) by way of the weight of the vote. Administering more significance to the vote and seeking to extend it threatens to reinforce rather than curtail the power of illiberal states.

Zakaria emphasizes the need for stricter liberal constitutionalism, rather than increases in democracy. Democracy provides no guarantee for the protection of civil or human rights (Zakaria, 1997). For instance, in 2010, of the 116 global democracies, only 89 were considered to be free (Freedom House, 2010). Zakaria asserts that constitutionalism breeds more effective democracy, but the opposite is not true (Zakaria, 1997:4) – suggesting the priority is to increase constitutionalism over democracy. The reckoning that illiberal democracy is not a temporary state of misdirection but a permanent condition (Brumberg, 2002: 56) suggests that constitutionalism is the only variable we have power to modify in order to guarantee civic freedoms. This alerts us to the possibility that an extension of enfranchisement is insufficient. Singapore serves as a practical example of a country that flouts Western democratic customs, but as a result of its strict internal security legislation and constitution grants people their rights to education, private property and religious worship. So widespread was contentment with the freedoms provided by the constitution that 'political rights were often in a faraway second place' (Hawksley, 2009: 295). Muslims constitute a 15% minority in Singapore; yet, their rights are better respected than those of Tamils in democratic India, which highlights the significance of constitutional liberalism (Hawksley, 2009: 298). Singapore's usefulness in combating drug culture and communism makes it an essential ally for the West, which questions the accepted truth that only democratic states share ambitions (Hawksley, 2009: 297) or that only democratic regimes are respectable. Croissant and Merkel (2004: 2) posit however, that despite the provision of *de jure* political rights, *de facto* restrictions to the rule of law undermine the effectiveness of constitutionalism. This is buttressed by the reality that the media in countries like Singapore is subjected to censoring as well as the tendency to condemn citizens to unfair trials (Diamond, 2003:168). Friedman (2005: 52) suggests that conflicting values makes impartiality, and therefore the rule of law impossible to achieve altogether in a top-down nature. Thereby suggesting that an extension of democracy is the most viable of the two options, which concurs with Churchill's suggestion that democracy albeit, far from perfect, is the least imperfect – therefore we should hope it increases.

In order to judge whether or not we should hope democracy increases, we must judge its compatibility with economic development. Consensus amongst political scientists suggests that there is insufficient factual evidence to identify any direct causal relationship between the two (Rodrik and Wacziarg, 2004: 1), suggesting only that democracy fosters an environment that is conducive to economic prosperity. Gerring et al. (2005:324) posit that democracies foster advanced, formal institutions that provide the basis for efficient bureaucracies and prevent the corruption that characterizes autocratic systems. This in turn creates an environment of certainty and stability that facilitates investment and growth. Democracy's protection of property rights is essential in fulfilling this function because it incentivizes people to develop their property and to work within the confines of the law to protect it (Przeworski and Limongi, 1993: 51). Thereby increasing the chances of a smooth transition of power and peaceful conflict resolution thereafter, which enhances the environment for economic growth (Oppenheimer and Edwards, 2012: 152). The suggestion is then, that democracy encourages political stability that in turn facilitates economic development (Huntington, 1984: 194). We can speculate therefore that if democracy were to spread, we would expect to see increased growth.

Not only, if a democratic nation becomes more democratic, and more politically stable they too may witness a turn in their economic outlook (Diamond, 2003: 38). Freedom House (2013) rates the Asia-Pacific region as 44% free and Western Europe as 85% free by comparison. This judges political and social freedom, but becomes more significant when we contrast them with World Bank figures of GDP per capita. The World Bank records per capita GDP at \$4,248 and \$34,033 respectively. This is indicative perhaps of a link between the degree of freedom and economic prosperity. Of course, this could be the result of a variety of reasons, a main one being different start points of industrialization – but the relationship between democracy and economic development should not be overlooked. Espousers of democracy urge the world to embrace democracy because they feel for as long as the world remains divided into democracies and non-democracies, the performance of democratic states will be impinged upon (Huntington, 1984:194), because of the system's dependence on integration (McFaul, 2005: 157). The increased likelihood of economic prosperity as a result of democracy stability makes the extension of the system covetable.

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That conclusion tends to facilitate the proliferation of democratic governments and overlook democracy's shortcomings; however, we have to question whether democracy as a model serves all countries equally well. Puddington (2008) suggests that democracy is not suited for growth in developing nations. It can be argued that the accumulation of wealth precedes democracy (Huntington, 1984: 199), and that only once a country reaches a certain degree of wealth will it develop into a democracy. That is because with more economic wealth, develops better education and literacy, two essential requirements of democracy. Collier has gauged this value at \$2,700 (Collier, 2010: 28). This is set as a minimum requirement and by no means does it imply that a country is bound to become democratic once they reach this value. For instance, Singapore has a GNI per capita of \$42, 930 (World Bank, 2013), and it seems unlikely it will advance from its current state of liberal autocracy. Democracy is thought to be inefficient in developing nations where there are a variety of conflicting interests (Hawksley, 2009: 371).

This essay has thus far questioned the generalization that autocracies cannot provide good leadership. By virtue of the fact that autocratic leaders are not held to account by an electorate, they are able to make difficult unpopular decisions that drive democracies into deadlock (Gerring et al., 2005: 334, Przeworski and Limongi, 1993: 56). We need not look further than Congress' inability to corroborate with Barack Obama to avert the 'fiscal cliff' and the potential relapse of the American economy back into recession (Lawder and Felsenthal, 2012). Rao (1984: 75) sheds light on the Obama administration's predicament; should they impose unpopular tax increases on the wealthy, or extend Bush's tax cuts in the knowledge that "no political party can hope to win a democratic election on a platform of current sacrifices for a bright future". The Telegraph (2012) labels democratic governments across Europe and America as 'deceitful' – forced to hand out untenable promises of government spending or face electoral defeat. Autocratic regimes are spared these pressures, and perhaps pursue more realistic policies as a result. It is a question of whether citizens prioritize having an accountable government, or one that relentlessly pursues economic growth. We have examined the possibility that a nation can grow under the auspices of autocracy (Gerring et al., 2005:324) until it develops into a democracy, however, the world's richest nations are by no coincidence the world's oldest democracies (McFaul, 2005: 150). Western governments stand the test of time, partly as a result of its applicability elsewhere, something a system like the Chinese does not appear or claim to have (Kissinger, 2011). In harmony with Churchill's quote, it can be concluded that democracy is far from being the only avenue for growth; however, it seems to be built on sturdier foundations than any rival.

The emergence of rival systems such as that of Singapore's functional liberal autocracy has rendered America's democratizing mission redundant and therefore made the spread of democracy less likely. Moreover America has done little to protect its integrity as the world's policeman (Maynes, 1998). America's commitment and faith in democracy is unquestionable, however, it is not pragmatic. It often engages in conflict without necessarily holding the establishment of democracy as the final aim, seeking instead only to avoid its alternatives. It is this negative angle of approach to the establishment of democracy that encouraged America to prop up terrorism during the battle against communism in the Middle East and more recently, the directionless combating of autocratic regimes – all which has culminated in a diminished public image of America, and severely reduced the likelihood of successful conversions to democracy. Kumar (2012: 65) exposes America as having cultivated Islamism, and rescinding support to secularists like Nasser who they felt were more likely to relate to the atheistic appeal of communism. The CIA funded \$3 billion to help consolidate and organize the Mujahedeen, who later became Al-Qaeda, the perpetrators of 9/11 (Kumar, 2012: 71). This has done the opposite of consolidating foundations for democracy in countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan that served as training grounds, and has in fact entrenched the power of terrorist organizations such as the Taliban. This has tarnished American reputation in the region. People perceive democratizing missions to be neo-colonialism and associate it with 'military occupation and politicians who steal money and support terrorism' (Hawksley, 2009: 132). We need not even consider the impotency created by America's crippling fiscal overstretch following a series of rash invasions (Mueller, 2005: 122), to judge that it is no longer financially viable for America to drive the extension of democracy (Blimes and Stiglitz, 2006: 2). This delivers a crippling blow to the prospects of democracy, which as seen in the case of Japan post World War Two, can at times require forceful promotion (Friedman, 2005: 55).

However, there is a tendency to disregard the merits of democracy, and instead judge it as a product of America. Perceptions of America should not taint people's view of democracy more generally. Democracy should be judged as a separate entity. The Arab Spring has reinvigorated the appeal of democracy, and has shown that America does not

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need to drive transitions to democracy. McFaul (2005: 152) suggests that 'being both pro-democracy and anti-American is no longer a contradiction'. Egypt, as of 2011 has had a democratically elected government (The Economist, 2012) and as of December 2012, a democratically elected constitution, that albeit, still has its flaws with regards to human rights protection (Spencer, 2012), marks an advancement towards model democracy. Most significantly, it is built largely on its own terms and pace, which guarantees its longevity. Egypt continues to serve as a figurehead for the region (Freedom House, 2012), and serves as inspiration for nations like Syria who continue to fight for democracy. A remarkable trait of the Arab Spring is the absence of the West as an overshadowing, intervening figure. The Arab Spring has shown that the Arab world is compatible with democracy despite common criticism (Mansur, 2005: 66), which is a huge step in legitimizing democracy as an ideal compatible with human race, irrespective of nationality or ethnicity. It has reinvigorated the force of democracy as the preeminent form of governance. Obama states that rights, transparent governance and accountability are not American values; they are sought by people by virtue of their humanity (Hawksley, 2009: 4). The Arab Spring should not be overstated as even Egypt has struggled to oust Islam from its new constitution altogether. Walker and Tucker (2011) fear that several years still separate Arabic governments from total freedom from misrule, but it undeniably renews hope for the feasibility of democracy, not only in the Middle East, but also more generally.

Democracy has stood the test of time, overcoming a series of economic and social disasters. Yet critics remain skeptical. Recent American governments have failed to grant nations the same degree of autonomy they themselves enjoyed in pursuing democracy. In so doing, they detract from the morality of democracy as a liberal set of principles. Not only, America has tarnished the system's sanctity by using it forcefully as a tool to pacify their enemies. Rival systems should not be outlawed, we should continue to trade with them as we do fellow democracies and trust that the allure of democracy and its propensity to create stable economies and societies will naturally increase the degree of democracy in the world (Deudney and Ikenberry, 2009: 93). Democracies should resort to violence for self-preservation; however, it should not aimlessly consume the world, setting the pace of transitions to democracy. The Arab Spring has been a great accolade for democracy because it has shown it can be an independent power. This suggests that the likelihood of more democracy is promising. Projects of democratization might have lost influence, but the principles at their core retain their value. Democracy, in other words, a government accountable to its people by virtue of free and fair elections acts as the basis for a functional society and economy, from which it can continue to develop from sturdy foundations. Zakaria has gathered significant support for his criticisms and proposed alternatives to democracy. However, liberal autocracies fall short crucially in the sense that unlike democracy, it is not a widely applicable or sustainable ideal and will forever require strict regulation, which makes difficult the dynamics of power sharing. We must not overlook the efficiency of liberal constitutionalism in safeguarding civic rights, but all in all democracy provides the best and most sustainable model for economic growth and for the protection of social solidarity. As we have seen in Egypt, its constitution still threatens to accommodate for a powerful presidency (The Economist, 2012) and threatens civil rights, so by no means should we trust constitutionalism unconditionally. Democracy's role in safeguarding against tyranny is still prominent. We should maintain hope that the world will become more democratic. If we fail to agree it's the best system, we can certainly agree it is the best of all those we have experienced.

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