

Liberal or Illiberal Democracies, What Are They?
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My vigilant husband has called my attention to my use of the term "Liberal Democracy." Many readers, even when college educated, are not familiar with that term. The word "liberal" suggests a political position, such as left-leaning. So in this column, and in future ones, when I use the term Liberal Democracy, I will spell out what it really means.

Liberal in this case means Liberty, or freedom. That freedom is provided by a division of power in the government (President, Congress, Courts), public input through voting, and free press. When any one ruling body is too strong, freedom is threatened. They all check each other. Our system is being tested today.

Freedom of the press, provided by the first amendment of our constitution, is perhaps the most important element of how a country stays free. Freedom of speech and freedom to investigate and disseminate information is a vital requirement for voting with thought. Our Founding Fathers noted that an ignorant electorate will not be able to keep a free country.

A modern liberal democracy also has several relatively new freedoms that are not enjoyed in much of the world: gender equality (a revolutionary 20th century change that is still rejected by conservative religious and social societies); freedom to practice (or not practice) any religion that recognizes the rights of others; and the rights of private property.

It is important to know, however, that none of these rights is always absolute. The practice of polygamy is illegal in this country, and when the Mormons wanted to join the union, they had to abandon what they considered a religious mandate. If Muslim immigrants arrive with polygamous families, seeking welfare for extra wives is illegal.

The only ideological requirement for citizenship in the United States is that we all, regardless of birthplace or religion, accept that the country is governed by the Constitution and Rule of Law. If a religion challenges this (militant Islamic law, Sharia, does), it is illegal. If a country holds elections but does not have any of the other checks and balances, it is illiberal (not free). Russia, Turkey, and Iran are examples of countries with elections but none have independent legislatures any more, or independent courts, and all of them routinely intimidate, lock up, and kill journalists.

Right now, 100 cities in Russia are demonstrating against Putin and Russia's notorious corruption; not one word of this appears in the Russian press or state-run television. In addition, all three of these countries persecute homosexuals and discourage shelters for battered women. In most Muslim-majority countries, even those with elections (very few), the courts are in league with the head of state and offer no protection to minorities or women.

For the past century, the United States has promoted, through its foreign policy (as has the United Nations), that countries hold free and democratic elections. Unfortunately, we have all overlooked what is required: such institutions as a free press, public literacy over 50 percent, courts that can check improper leadership, gender equality, and religious liberty. They hold elections in which those permitted to run are hand picked by the country's leadership, and then prevent them from challenging the head of state. An elected president in Iran can be vetoed by the clergy, who are the real power and are milking the country dry through corruption.

Still, an illiberal democracy is certainly better than the final two options: a totalitarian dictatorship or anarchy. Saudi Arabia is an example of a religious dictatorship in which power is shared by a royal family and well-funded clergy. Unfortunately, what they do does not just affect them; they sponsor around the world with money and foot-soldiers a poisonous form of Islam, establishing brainwashing schools, subversive mosques, and political machinations that keep the Middle East in turmoil.

Venezuela is an example of a revolutionary illiberal democracy now descending into anarchy. Oil in the ground, but no food in the markets. This is a bad system and is already stirring a new revolution.

Freedom is not free. Liberal Democracy is the only way to protect it.

679 words

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