

Indonesia\222s Endangered Democracy.
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At the end of the 20th century, it appeared that Democracy was on a roll. The UN published the list of once authoritarian countries joining the roster of participatory governments. It appeared that the US had not only defeated the Communists in the Cold War, but had won the war for hearts and minds. Everyone wanted to be a modern democracy.

An analysis by the US Government-funded Freedom House (a think tank) showed that there was not a single liberal democracy with universal suffrage in the world in 1900, but that in 2000, 120 of the world\222s 192 nations, or 62%, were such democracies.

A key definition here is "liberal" democracy, which means universal adult suffrage and separation of powers (administration, courts, free press, congress or parliaments), all of them sharing in the task of keeping the country free from abuse of power. There are many "illiberal" democracies in the world that claim to be democracies because the population periodically votes. None of the other protections are there to prevent individuals or sectors from totalitarian power.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and after the brief flowering of liberal democracies, the world has seen considerable backsliding. In Europe alone, euphoric freedom seekers in Poland, Hungary, Italy, and Spain, have reverted to less than liberal, with dictatorial leaders and attacks on the press and courts. Other former democracy enthusiasts are now increasingly authoritarian: Turkey, Brazil, and the Philippines. Egypt, Honduras, Russia, and Venezuela have trampled their political opponents without concern for weak protests from the US, whose current leadership is in the vanguard of an "America First" campaign.

During the George W. Bush administration, Paul Wolfowitz, a former Ambassador to Indonesia, had an influential role in promoting the idea that democracy has universal appeal and that even Muslim-majority countries really wanted democracy if they had the chance. Much of our flawed foreign policy during that period (including the Iraq war) was based on this illusion. The flaw in this claim was that indeed, Muslims wanted to vote; however, they did not want gender equality for women, nor did they want a free press or secular courts. Demonstrators in the Egyptian streets bellowed for "freedom," but the freedom they wanted was only for men, many of whom punished demonstrating women by groping and raping them for their audacity. Many idealistic journalists missed this distinction. Egypt would not be a "liberal democracy." And it is not.

Indonesia, Wolfowitz\222s favorite example of the compatibility of democracy and Islam, is increasingly demonstrating this falsehood. Dr. Wolfowitz saw what he wanted, while another keen observer, the late V. S. Naipaul, visited the non-Arab Muslim world to see why militant Islam was eroding secular modernity. He found widespread agreement among all classes of men that Islam would put women back in their place. Their "democracy" would not have gender equality, nor would it have religious toleration. Saudi money was being spent on religious academies throughout Asia (including Indonesia) grooming a new generation of Muslim fanatics. Wolfowitz missed this.

Indonesia still claims to be a democracy, and indeed it does hold elections. But what can we make of a recent court case (one of many) in which an ethnic Chinese woman who had complained about the noisy mosque loud speaker in her neighborhood was arrested and sentenced to 18 months in prison for "blasphemy" against Islam? Indonesia\222s constitution guarantees freedom of speech and religion, but since 2004, 147 people have been imprisoned under blasphemy or related laws. Mobs burned and ransacked at least 14 Buddhist temples in Sumatra, also complaining that the blasphemous woman\222s sentence was too short. So much for Muslim Democracy.

In Europe and the US, bigots attack all people who happen to be Muslim. They fail to distinguish between people of Muslim origin who are secular, peaceful, and totally integrated into modern society and those for whom Militant Islam is a poisonous ideology. Just as there is more than one kind of democracy (liberal or authoritarian) there is a difference between peaceful (or non-practicing) Muslims and religious-fascist ideologues. Our democracy depends on understanding the difference.

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