

## DEMOCRACY

# If You Want to Free Your Country, First Liberate Its Land

By FAREED ZAKARIA

**S**O YOU WANT TO SPREAD DEMOCRACY. BY NOW, IT'S PRETTY obvious that this is easier said than done. George W. Bush's stirring rhetoric about freedom has suggested a too-simple path: just rid the country of its tyrant and the people will be free. Bush often asserts that people in every country and culture yearn for democracy and are capable of it. To argue otherwise represents cultural condescension. It's not that President Bush is wrong at the abstract level—if Nazi Germany and fascist Japan could become democratic, it can happen most anywhere—but the argument holds at such an elevated plane

that it becomes meaningless when applied on the ground. Consider, for example, Haiti, where the United States has attempted to foster democracy on and off for almost a century—with almost no success. Why? Surely Haitians yearn to be free. But there are aspects of its politics, economics and culture that have made it very difficult to establish liberal democracy. Changing these conditions is a hard, complex and long-term challenge. It is not impossible. There are many examples of success. But there are many more of failure. What is needed is careful study, pragmatism and humility.

One simple path to democracy is to hold elections. This has an obvious appeal. It legitimizes the political system, broadens participation and provides a simple answer to the question “Who should rule?” Holding elections is a defining feature of any liberal democracy. But it should not be the first step in building a democracy. Western societies went through centuries of modernization before they held elections. The Magna Carta, which first established limits on governmental power, preceded universal adult suffrage in Britain by about 800 years. It takes time to develop institutions of law and a civil society. Consider the problem of ethnic and sectarian strife, which is endemic to so many modern societies. If you hold elections in newly democratizing countries too fast, people will vote only according to their established ethnic, religious or racial identities—and that will undermine the creation of a genuine liberal democracy.

But if the simple solutions proposed by the right are not really that effective, neither are those suggested by the left. Foreign aid, for example, is not a panacea. More aid will not produce more democracy, or even better governance. Much of the history of foreign aid is one of good intentions leading to hellish situations—massive corruption and the entrenchment of near-feudal elites. The early and successful transitions to democracy—in countries like Taiwan and South Korea in East Asia, and Chile in South America—were not the product of aid programs. There are certainly programs that have worked, many of them in medical and scientific areas. But while debt relief, new loans and grants are all worthwhile, how they are structured is absolutely

crucial to their success. Otherwise, they can actually undermine the cause by giving foreign assistance a bad reputation.

If there is a dominant obstacle to building democracy, one that seems to recur in country after country, it is feudalism. In most developing countries, land is the most important asset, and is key to economic and thus political power. And the patterns of land ownership across much of the world are highly unequal. In a country like Pakistan, for example, land ownership has

tended to remain concentrated, and as a result, a small group of local elites has wielded power, no matter what the political system. When elections are held, often the candidate elected is a local landowner or someone financed by him. Even in India, the regions where democracy functions worst—the large northern states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar—are those places where land ownership resembles that same pattern.

The solution is land reform, an orderly redistribution of assets—most often to the farmers who have worked on the land for generations. The results speak for themselves. The United States pushed for land reform in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. All three ended up with functioning democratic systems. On the other hand, in Haiti, Cuba, the Philippines and Nicaragua, despite having the opportunity, America did not pursue land reform. The result is that in all those countries, establishing democracy has been a long, uphill battle.

Land reform has often been thought of as a socialist project. But it is really the opposite. Properly done, the process for the first time puts land—the largest asset in most societies—into the marketplace. Most feudal elites acquired their land by dubious—and decidedly nonmarket—means, usually coercion or royal grants. These feudals rarely used their thousands of acres efficiently, often leaving them fallow. Land reform has tended to give ownership of the land to its users, who most often farm it efficiently or sell it to someone who can. The reforms are crucial in converting a backward peasant society into a modern capitalist one, which then creates the basis for civil society and democracy.

Americans should understand the link between privately held land and freedom. The 1862 Homestead Act, which gave away 10 percent of the land in the United States, was premised on precisely this connection. And the eminent economist-activist Hernando de Soto has argued that the chief obstacle to development in the Third World is the unwillingness of feudal elites and governments to give full-fledged property rights to their tenants and farmers.

A call for land reform is not as stirring as one for freedom. It is not as easy to televise as elections. But in the end, it is what will actually make democracy take root in foreign soil.



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