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Debate on democracy misses point

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NOT even the cynics consumed by South Korea's dire economic crisis doubted that the country's general election would be honest, above-board, with a result that would meet with widespread acquiescence both at home and abroad. Yet only 18 years ago this country was a dictatorship; only 50 years ago a poverty-ridden village economy.

For all the magnitude of its present financial troubles it cannot be gainsaid that South Korea has gone from rags to riches, from one-man rule to one man (and one-woman) one vote in a generation. It is truly one of the wonders of our age. After all, only in the late 1940s did most western countries become fully-fledged democracies, with universal adult suffrage.

Outstanding through the march of time South Korea's progress has been, it is part of a broader movement that has swept most of the world in recent decades.

Last year I reported in my pre-Christmas column that 1996 had been a vintage, landmark year for the spread of political rights and civil liberties. 79 of the world's 191 countries could be considered totally free and another 59 relatively free societies. Altogether some 62 per cent of the world's population were free of tyrannical rule.

This year, in a report published on Thursday, Freedom House, the New York-based body that tracks these trends said, "the wave of global democratisation may have peaked." Although there has been a small increase in the number of democracies, China and the Arab countries (with the exception of Jordan, Kuwait and Morocco) remain democracy backwaters and show few signs of forward momentum.

This slowing of the previous pace has triggered a strange debate, catalysed by the lead article in the current issue of Foreign Affairs, written by its managing editor, Fareed Zakaria. His thesis is that we now confront the disturbing phenomenon of "illiberal democracy". We may have a large number of democracies, he argues, but many of them do not contain a critical ingredient for long-term success - "constitutional liberalism", i.e. the rule of law, a separation of powers and the protection of basic liberties, of speech, assembly, religion and property. The danger of this, as Stephen Rosenfeld writes in the Washington Post, is that "democracy can become a ticket to a crude anything-goes majoritarianism".

But does it? Democracy Russian-Yeltsin-style or Mexican-Zedillo-style or Malaysian-(Datuk Seri Dr) Mahathir (Muhamad)-style may be only part of the loaf, but isn't it rather more than half a loaf?

The critics of so-called "illiberal democracy" see only a snapshot. They miss where the country in question is coming from and thus don't perceive the likely destination. If one takes the 57 elected democracies in the Freedom House list that are described as only "partly free" - Russia, Colombia, Mexico, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, India, Senegal etc. - although there may be a tendency for elected leaders to exercise power arbitrarily most of their leaders do function within the context of checks and balances in their power. These are not states that brutally suppress basic freedoms.

Democracy, in fact, can survive in a wide variety of settings but once established it usually does work to increase the chances for the development of a broader range of freedoms. Today, as Freedom House reports, "democracies are gradually expanding the broad range of rights enjoyed by its citizens. In 1995, of 117 democracies 64 per cent were

totally free. By 1997, nearly 70 per cent were free."

This trend suggests that far from inhibiting the rule of law, a vibrant civic society and limited government, electoral democracy is propelling the global expansion of freedom.

While there are some democratically elected leaders, such as Slovakia's Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar, who practice an authoritarian style of rule and resort to demagoguery or who, like Pakistan's Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, use an overwhelming parliamentary majority to concentrate power, they are the exceptions.

Turkey is a good example of a democracy on the move (a state of affairs, unfortunately, not apparent to European Union leaders who once again this week have blackballed Turkey's membership). Turkey by the year is expanding its freedoms - these days the most telling critics of its human rights abuses are its own Press and vibrant civic groups.

This in fact is the tendency, by and large, of all so called "illiberal democracies". Unlike in the period between the two world wars, the present sprouting of democracy shows few signs of withering. Indeed, the pessimism of the "illiberal democracy" school has a dated look more influenced by Hilter's Europe than present worldwide realities. It simply does not square with the times we now live in. The South Korean story will before too long, I suspect, be most countries' story.

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