

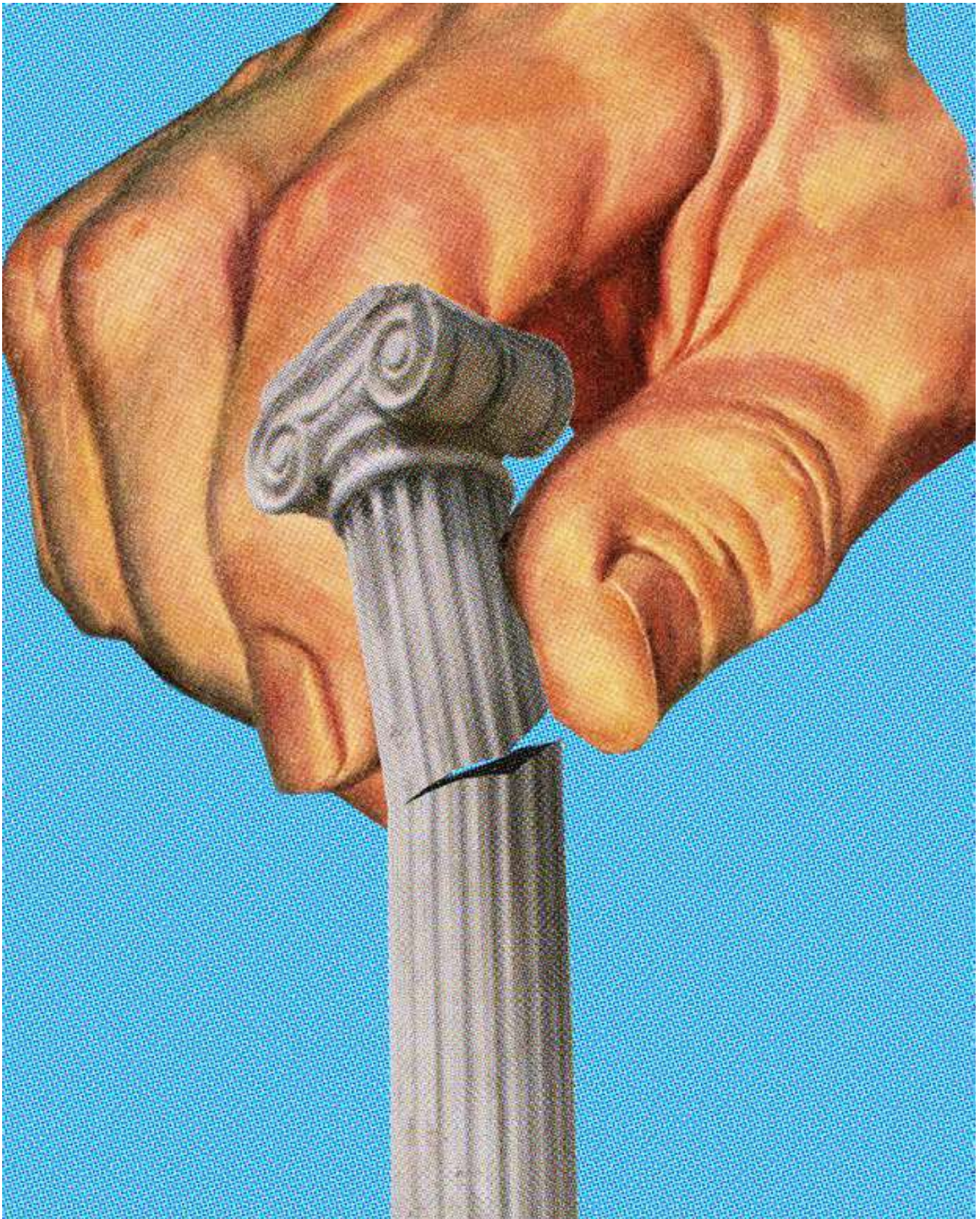


IDEAS

# HOW DIVERSE DEMOCRACIES CAN PROTECT THEIR CITIZENS

Only liberal values can ensure true freedom.

By Yascha Mounk



Adam Maida / The Atlantic; CSA-Printstock / Getty

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***About the author:** Yascha Mounk is a contributing writer at The Atlantic and the author of The Great Experiment: Why Diverse Democracies Fall Apart and How They Can Endure.*

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SOMETIME IN LATE 2017 or early 2018, Saif Ali Khan, a 22-year-old fruit vendor who made his living in the markets of Bikaner, in northwest India, met a young woman who lived in a nearby neighborhood. They fell in love and resolved to get married. Then the family of the would-be bride discovered the couple's plans.

Horrified that their daughter, a Hindu, would start a relationship with Khan, a Muslim, the bride's parents hastily arranged a more "suitable" match and sent her to stay with family in Rampura Basti, about two miles away. But Khan and his lover were not willing to give up so easily. They decided to elope.

This article is excerpted from Mounk's [recent book](#).

The instant Khan arrived at the house in Rampura Basti, six men set upon him. After beating him bloody and unconscious, his lover's relatives drove him to Karni Industrial Area, at the edge of Bikaner, and dumped him in a pool of wastewater. "They hit him mercilessly and broke his legs," Khan's brother, Asmal, would later tell a local journalist. "They drove their car over his legs and left him in the drain." By the next morning, he had succumbed to his injuries.

The history of the 20th century has focused the minds of philosophers and social scientists on the oppressive powers of modern states. But a more long-standing, and equally potent, danger to individual liberty is the so-called cage of norms.

As Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson argue in *The Narrow Corridor*, the absence of a state need not result in a life of anarchy that is "nasty, brutish, and short." To maintain some semblance of social order "in societies without centralized authority," unwritten rules often exercise "a different but no less disempowering sort of dominance on people." They tell people how they ought to worship and what they can wear, whether they may speak and what they should say, when they can have sex and whom they must marry.

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## The Great Experiment: Why Diverse Democracies Fall Apart and How They Can Endure

YASCHA MOUNK,  
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Developed democracies have abolished many of the practices that Acemoglu and Robinson describe. But even today, members of tight-knit ethnic or religious communities can, like Saif Ali Khan, be subject to the power of their communities in horrific ways. In diverse democracies around the world, the cage of norms persists, entrapping fundamentalist Christians in Topeka who are forced to attend “conversion therapy,” Orthodox Jews in Brooklyn who lose the right to see their children if they leave their community, Somali women in northern Sweden who suffer genital mutilation, and Turkish women in Berlin who fear being murdered in an “honor killing.”

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On what basis can diverse democracies protect their citizens from coercion—both by the state and by members of their own groups?

**A**BSOLUTE POWER, as they say, corrupts absolutely. That’s why the history of liberal democracy is, in good part, the history of imposing creative limits on the state.

Over the course of centuries, three kinds of limits on state power evolved. Regular elections allow citizens to remove leaders from office when they grow unpopular. The separation of powers helps make sure that elections will be free and fair. But these institutional innovations are not enough to ensure that citizens lead lives that are meaningfully free, because an intolerant majority can push even fairly elected governments to oppress minority groups. A third feature is therefore needed to protect minority groups from both the state and the tyranny of the majority: the recognition that there is a sphere of life in which everybody should be able to do what they like without having to worry about anyone else’s opinion.

Taken together, regular elections, the separation of powers, and individual rights go a long way toward protecting citizens against the dominant power of the state. But do these core institutions of liberal democracy also allow individuals to orient their lives

around the deep ties many of them have to their own communities—or do they, as some critics of liberalism claim, assume too atomistic an understanding of human nature?

Communitarians believe that they are in a better position than liberals to respect the deep importance that cultural ties play in the lives of many people. Rather than thinking of diverse democracies as composed of individual citizens, communitarians propose, we should conceptualize them as loose federations of ethnic and religious communities.

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A diverse democracy that embraces communitarianism would seemingly do well at upholding one plausible goal of diverse democracies: ensuring that cultural or religious communities can thrive. Recognizing, say, the Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist Convention, and the Council on American-Islamic Relations as basic building blocks of society would grant them far-reaching rights and privileges.

But how should a diverse democracy go about determining which groups should enjoy official recognition and which are too new or too small or too “frivolous” to count as one of its basic building blocks? How can it ensure that the leaders of these groups actually speak for their members? And what happens to the many people who don’t neatly fit into any recognized group?

An even bigger problem is that such a communitarian conception would, even as it seemingly protects people from persecution and allows them to be true to their inherited identity, make it impossible for people to chart their own course through life. Individuals who do not agree with the customs of the communities into which they are born would, like Saif Ali Khan, be left at the mercy of an oppressive cage of norms.

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States that conceive of themselves as a mere “association of associations” have no apparent justification for interfering in the “internal” affairs of such groups. This means that they would have to stand aside when groups fail to tolerate internal dissent, render their children incapable of living a self-determined life, or stop those who want to strike out on their own from exiting the group. If you are a gay man born into a Christian cult that believes homosexuality to be evil, or an intellectually curious child born into a Hasidic sect that discourages you from pursuing a secular education, you will have to get used to living within the cage constructed by “your” association.

**L**IBERALS CAN DO BETTER than communitarians and other rival philosophical traditions at reconciling the desire of many citizens to be true to their identity with their need to be free from the cage of norms. In the liberal view, diverse democracies are constituted by a broad variety of individuals, not a set of groups. They should be committed to protecting the core freedoms of these individuals. A just democracy has a legitimate reason, and even an obligation, to step in when ethnic or religious groups attempt to coerce their own members.

Critics claim that this emphasis on individuals makes classical liberals incapable of appreciating the importance that groups play in the lives of so many people. But liberals have deep respect for the importance of family, religion, and tradition in contemporary societies. They are fully aware that many citizens lead their lives in accordance with norms they consider dictates of conscience. In fact, this is precisely why liberals are so concerned with protecting the kinds of guarantees of personal liberty, such as freedom of speech and worship, that ensure that citizens won't be forced to abdicate their innermost beliefs.

This is also why liberal states across the world should—and do—allow their citizens to structure their lives around their cultural and religious commitments in ways that the majority might at times feel to be extreme. So long as they provide pupils with enough secular education to give them genuine choices for how to lead their lives once they become adults, religious communities can establish schools that instruct children in the traditions of their faith. Citizens who genuinely feel that serving in the army would violate their conscience enjoy exemptions from compulsory military service. And when communities like the Amish decide to live in great isolation from the customs of mainstream society, nobody forces them to use modern technology or mingle with their neighbors.

But for liberals, this deep respect for cultural or religious communities ultimately derives from the commitments of their members. If liberals respect Baptist churches or the Muslim faith or the Humanist Union, they do so not because they regard these groups as the founding units of our society, but because these groups hold tremendous significance to millions of people.

To be truly free, citizens of diverse democracies must know that they will not experience hostility or discrimination based on the color of their skin; that they can worship as they please; and that they are, if they so wish, free to spend most of their lives within the ethnic or religious communities into which they were born. Guaranteeing their citizens' freedom from oppression by an out-group is a key task of a liberal state. But citizens of diverse democracies must also know that they will be free to leave the group into which they were born; to violate its norms without fear of



suffering destitution, violence, or death at the hands of their own elders; and to define themselves by the identities and associations they themselves choose. Any state that neglects its citizens' freedom from coercion by their own group neglects an equally important precondition of meaningful self-determination.

Citizens need to benefit from all the institutional innovations that have historically proved capable of keeping a tyrannical state at bay and know that the communities to which they belong will be able to practice their customs in peace. And they must also be able to call upon the assistance of the state to defend them against any private groups that might, against their will, enclose them in a cage of norms. Only a diverse democracy built on the principles of philosophical liberalism is capable of protecting both of these core values at the same time.

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This article is excerpted from Mounk's book, *The Great Experiment: Why Diverse Democracies Fall Apart and How They Can Endure*.

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