The Review of Politics 77 (2015), 171–190.
© University of Notre Dame
doi:10.1017/S0034670515000029

Democracy under the Caliphs: Alfarabi's Unusual Understanding of Popular Rule

Alexander I. Orwin

Abstract: The account of "democracy" presented in the writings of Alfarabi differs considerably from all other treatments of the subject, both ancient and modern. The goal of this article is to elucidate the *falāsifa*'s view of democracy and account for its unusual character, by showing how appropriate it is to both the meaning of the term in medieval Arabic and the political situation of their own time. Questions such as internal order, war, immigration, philosophy, and their relationship to democracy as understood by the *falāsifa* are all duly considered. The article concludes with the suggestion that this peculiar sort of democracy nonetheless resembles modern democracy in one small but crucial respect.

The philosopher Alfarabi (870–950) ranks among the few medieval Islamic authors who treated the subject of democracy.[1] He inherited the theme from classical political thought, and in particular from Plato, but his presentation is in many respects entirely original, and suited to its place and time. The result is a surprising account of democracy that in crucial respects resembles neither classical Greek nor modern democracy. My purpose in this article is to explain what Alfarabi meant by "democracy," distinguish it from more common understandings of the term, and show how his discussion highlights some tensions within democracy as well as its precarious status in the Islamic world.

Alexander I. Orwin is a doctoral candidate in the Committee on Social Thought, University of Chicago, 1130 E. 59th St., Chicago, IL 60637 (niwro1@gmail.com).

[1]Alfarabi's most substantial discussion can be found in "The Political Regime," trans. Charles Butterworth, in *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, 2nd ed., ed. Joshua Parens Joseph C. Macfarland (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 36–55. Every citation will include both this English version and the Arabic edition *Kitāb al-Siyāsa al-Madaniyya*, ed. Fauzi M. Najjar (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1993). This will allow both Arabic and non-Arabic readers to check my references. To avoid confusion, the Arabic will be cited in square brackets. Among the medieval Islamic philosophers, Averroes (1126–1198) also provides an extensive treatment of democracy, in the form of a commentary on Plato's *Republic*. This work, which survives only in Hebrew, has been ably edited and translated by Erwin Rosenthal (*Averroes' Commentary on Plato's "Republic,"* ed. E. I. J. Rosenthal [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966]). It was translated yet again by Ralph Lerner, from whose edition I will cite (*Averroes on Plato's "Republic,"* trans. Ralph Lerner [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974]). Space prevents me from treating Averroes's account in any detail, but I hope that a few footnotes will help to stimulate interest in it.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000029 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Let us begin with some scholarly and historical background. There exist, as far as I know, three major accounts of the subject, by Muhsin Mahdi, Fauzi M. Najjar, and Muhammad Ali Khalidi,[2] as well as a number of shorter treatments, many of which amount only to brief summaries or citations. All three major discussions remain useful, and will be cited at various points throughout the article. But Mahdi and Najjar do not delve deeply enough into the details of the argument, while Khalidi tends to overestimate both the extent of Alfarabi's disagreements with Plato and his support for modern liberal democracy. This article attempts to provide a more detailed and comprehensive treatment of the subject, and establish exactly how much, or in some cases how little, can be learned from Alfarabi with regard to contemporary democracy.

Alfarabi helped to introduce ancient Greek philosophy into the Islamic world. However, his actual exposure to this philosophy would have been limited to the ancient texts that had been transmitted to him. Unfortunately, the number of such texts seems to have been rather small. While the question of the general availability of Platonic dialogues in the form that we have them is controversial,[3] the obvious debt that Alfarabi's discussion of democracy owes to Plato's *Republic* suggests that he must have at least had access to a reliable summary of the work. There is much less evidence of any knowledge of the treatment of democracy in Aristotle's *Politics*, in either the works of the medieval Islamic philosophers or scholarly articles on the transmission of Aristotle in medieval Islam.[4] As for Herodotus, Thucydides, and the

[2]Muhsin Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 144–46. Fauzi M. Najjar, "Democracy in Islamic Political Philosophy," *Studia Islamica*, no. 50 (1980): 107–22. Muhammad Ali Khalidi, "Al-Fārābī on the Democratic City," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 11, no. 3 (2003): 379–94. Other scholars who have made briefer comments on the question will also be cited. Another significant article on the subject, of which I became aware of only in the later stages of the publication of this article and am therefore unable to discuss, has been written by Malik Mufti. See Mufti, Malik, "The Many-Colored Cloak: Evolving Conceptions of Democracy in Islamic Political Thought," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 27, no. 2 (2010): 1–27.

[3]For some useful scholarly discussions, which express widely varying points of view, see Dimitri Gutas, "Galen's *Synopsis* of Plato's *Laws* and Fārābī's *Talkhīṣ*," in *The Ancient Tradition in Christian and Islamic Hellenism*, ed. Gerhard Endress and Remke Kruk (Leiden: Research School CNWS, 1997), 101–19; Steven Harvey, "Did Alfarabi Read Plato's Laws?," *Mediaevo Rivista di storia della philosophia medievale* 28 (2003): 51–68; Joshua Parens, *Metaphysics as Rhetoric: Alfarabi's Summary of Plato's "Laws"* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); David C. Reisman, "Plato's *Republic* in Arabic: A Newly Discovered Passage," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 14 (2004): 263–300. This list is by no means comprehensive.

[4]Shlomo Pines suggested that fragments of summaries or fragments of the *Politics* might have existed in medieval Islam. See Shlomo Pines, "Aristotle's *Politics* in Arabic Philosophy," *Israel Oriental Studies* 5 (1975): 150–60. Remi Brague cast doubt on some of Pines's evidence in Rémi Brague, "Note sur la traduction arabe de la

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000029 Published online by Cambridge University Press

various Roman authors, all of whom ought to have been most pertinent to the subject, they seem not to have been transmitted in any way, shape, or form into the Islamic world. For lack of other alternatives, Alfarabi's account of democracy takes Plato's *Republic* as its starting point.[5]

Alfarabi does not merely summarize Plato, but adapts and even alters his argument in some surprising ways. Such changes were necessitated not only by Alfarabi's originality as a thinker, but also by the circumstances of his own time. While Plato grew up under a popular democracy in Athens, and would have been familiar with numerous other examples of such a government, Alfarabi lived in a time and place that knew only the rule of armies, caliphs, and sultans. Elected assemblies, popular participation in government by lot, strong legal limitations on the power of the ruler, or any of the other institutions normally associated with ancient or modern democracy would not have been directly familiar to Alfarabi and his contemporaries. What could "democracy" even mean in such a context? Alfarabi's ingenious answer is typical of his success in adapting ancient Greek thought in order to make sense of his own world. I will discuss several examples of these adaptations as my interpretation unfolds.

The most obvious feature of Alfarabi's presentation of democracy is its classification among the ignorant or nonvirtuous governments (*Political Regime* 46.93 [87.18–88.3]). This may tempt some readers to dismiss democracy altogether. Since I cannot give an adequate account of the virtuous government here, but plan to do so in other publications, two observations will have to suffice. First, some scholars have argued quite convincingly that Alfarabi's virtuous government is no more intended to be actualized than the city of Plato's *Republic*.[6] If this is indeed the case, then it would be foolish not to consider the practical value of the ignorant governments. Second, Alfarabi does not cast aside the ignorant governments on account of their inferiority to the virtuous government, but persists again and again in ranking them according to goodness, happiness, and virtue (47.96 [89.10–11], 48.101 [92.6], 49.103 [93.13], 52.115 [100.11]).[7] By taking the ignorant cities seriously, we are merely following Alfarabi's own cue.

Politique, derechef, qu'elle n'existe pas," *Aristote Politique*, ed. Pierre Aubenque (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993), 423–33. Most importantly for our purposes, neither article cites any material from Books IV through VI, the books in which Aristotle's longest discussions of democracy occur.

[5]I will cite the *Republic* by Stephanus numbers. I use the following editions: Plato, *Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991), and *Platonis Opera*, vol. 4, ed. Joannes Burnet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).

[6]Joshua Parens, *Introducing Alfarabi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 29ff.

[7]As Christopher Colmo puts it, "Alfarabi recognizes more or less virtuous rulers even among the ignorant rulers" (Christopher Colmo, *Breaking with Athens: Alfarabi as Founder* [Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005], 92).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000029 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Freedom, Diversity, and Equality in Alfarabi's Democracy

Alfarabi's only extensive treatment of democracy occurs in a treatise called the *Political Regime*. Alfarabi also discusses several other types of government, including governments based on necessity, wealth, pleasure, honor, and domination (*Political Regime* 46.92ff. [87.5]). I will have more to say about these other forms of government when I examine their relationship to democracy. But let us begin by considering democracy in isolation.

The best way to orient ourselves around Alfarabi's account of democracy is to begin by comparing it to Plato's. These two accounts of democracy have a strong affinity, but also a number of notable differences. Alfarabi omits certain important statements of Plato, while elaborating on certain others. He also introduces some entirely new ideas of his own. In keeping with the *Republic*, Alfarabi includes freedom, diversity, and equality among the principal characteristics of democracy. Yet his order and emphasis are quite different. Plato opens with freedom, free speech, and the license to do whatever one wants (*Republic* 557b4–11). He then turns to diversity (557c1–9). Equality comes later, and only imperfectly, as the consequence of the action of the government (558c5–6). Plato's order appears quite logical: the license of democracy allows everyone to live his life as he sees fit, inevitably producing a great variety of human types. It does not produce complete equality, since some humans are more adept at using their freedom then others (cf. 564e6–7). Alfarabi, however, inverts the sequence of subjects. Having begun with freedom, he promptly turns to equality. The only law (*sunna*)[8] on which democracy is based grants nobody superiority (*faḍl*) over anybody else: in this respect it differs from most other types of government, where the authority of the ruler depends on his possessing the qualities that the society deems superior (*Political Regime* 51.113 [99.8]; cf. 46.94 [88.9–11], 47.95 [89.4–5], 48.101 [92.6–7]: all cited passages employ the root f-ḍ-l).[9] Equality for Alfarabi is not merely an eventual result of democratic society, but one of its fundamental principles.

As for diversity, Alfarabi mentions it only later (*Political Regime* 51.113 [99.9–14]). And yet he expands his description of it well beyond Plato's.

[8]Butterworth translates this term as "traditional law." It has some religious connotations but one may doubt whether the democratic *sunna* of total equality and freedom resembles the *sunna* or even stricter *sharīʿa* of Sunni Islam. Apart from this term, there is absolutely nothing resembling religious terminology in Alfarabi's account of democracy.

[9]One of the most important features of the Arabic language is the derivation of most of its vocabulary from a selection of three-letter roots. We will encounter another crucial root, j-m-ʿ, in the ensuing argument. Butterworth translates the root f-ḍ-l as "virtuous" or "superior," depending on the context. The phrase invariably translated as "virtuous city" is *al-madīna al-fāḍila*. It seems impossible to retain this connection in English translation.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000029 Published online by Cambridge University Press

While Plato speaks generically of "all sorts of human beings" coming to be in democracy (*Republic* 557c1–2), Alfarabi elaborates the details. His democracy welcomes a dazzling array of human character types, good, bad, and ugly, and the proliferation of every possible way of life. All forms of sexual intercourse, birth, and upbringing take place in democracy, and people from all nations flock to live in it. With the passage of time, poetry, rhetoric, and wisdom eventually begin to flourish within it (*Political Regime* 51.115 [100.14–101.5]). The democratic city is thus able to incorporate all of the other kinds of association, ignorant and virtuous, within it (51.113 [99.12–13]). One could argue that this diversity is implied by Plato's general statement, but that would not suffice to explain why Alfarabi takes so much trouble to embellish it.

Despite Alfarabi's colorful description of the diverse elements of the democratic city, he follows Plato in saying nothing about the role of religion in that city. This omission may appear even more glaring in Alfarabi,[10] for whom religion is usually a major theme, than in Plato. But this lacuna may be filled in by considering the general import of Alfarabi's statements. The multiplicity of ways of life that characterizes democracy has as its corollary a multiplicity of religions. A government that permits its subjects to lead whatever way of life is most pleasing to them can hardly be expected to impose any official religious doctrine or affiliation on them. Alfarabi confirms this interpretation in the *Book of Religion*, by omitting freedom, the central principle of democracy, from the list of the goals sought by the founders of religion, while including virtue, health, wealth, honor, and domination, which are the goals of the other kinds of government.[11] This omission, far from being accidental, reveals the incompatibility of official religion with a government based on freedom: no founder of a religion who desires to establish his creed would ever grant his community unqualified freedom, since that would entail freedom to reject his religion. A democratic government, whose principle is freedom, cannot strongly favor any one religion over another, and is therefore certain to attract members of many different religions.

The medieval Arabic translation of "democracy," *madīna jamāʿiyya*, serves to further highlight these phenomena. The important Arabic root j-m-ʿsignifies the assembling of a large group, so that forms of it have come to mean "congregation," "consensus," "league," "university," and "plural."[12] The *madīna jamāʿiyya* consists of a vast assemblage of all sorts of

[10]Najjar has observed that none of the religious terms that figure in the contemporary debates about Islam and democracy appear in either Alfarabi's or Averroes's treatments of democracy, which have consequently been ignored by most contemporary Muslim scholars (Najjar, "Democracy in Islamic Political Philosophy," 107–9).

[11]Alfarabi, *Alfarabi: The Political Writings*, trans. Charles Butterwoth (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 93. See also Colmo, *Alfarabi as Founder*, 92–93.

[12]For more on the meaning of this root, see Najjar, "Democracy in Islamic Political Philosophy," 110. It is striking that contemporary Arabic has ceased to used this expression, preferring to import the modern European word in the form *dīmuqratiyya*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000029 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ethnic groups, religions, human types, and ways of life. But the Arabic term for democracy fails to say anything about who governs this assemblage. In contrast, the Greek term *demokratia* signifies the "rule of the people." This meaning is reflected in Plato, who begins his account of democracy by declaring that it is a regime ruled by the people at the expense of the rich (*Republic* 557a1–8). However licentious Plato's democracy may eventually become, its origins lie in an act of brute force through which the poor seize control of the regime (*politeia*) and its offices (*archai*: 557a4). This gives Plato's democracy a certain structure and hierarchy, at least until excessive freedom undermines it (562c ff.). Yet this Platonic passage finds no direct parallel in Alfarabi, who launches into his account of the freedom and equality prevailing in democracy without saying anything about who governs it (*Political Regime* 51.113 [99.7]). While Plato can rely on Greek political practice to explain who governs democracy, Alfarabi has no such recourse, since direct popular governance was unknown in his time and place.

We may now understand how much Alfarabi's extension of the role of equality in Plato's democracy, and elaboration of its diversity, has heightened the challenge of governance. In a teeming, diverse city where no one in principle acknowledges any superiors, how does anyone acquire the authority to rule? Alfarabi is therefore compelled to interrupt his description of democracy's diversity in order to discuss its governance far more comprehensively than Plato ever did. Examining Alfarabi's novel account of democratic governance will allow us to appreciate what is so unusual about his understanding of democracy.

The Governance of Alfarabi's Democracy

One way to "solve" the problem of democratic governance would be to admit that there is no good solution, and that democracy must be necessarily anarchic. At the end of his initial treatment of equality and diversity within democracy, Alfarabi comes close to stating this point of view: "If their situation is examined closely, it turns out that in truth there is no ruler among them and no ruled" (*Political Regime* 51.113 [99.16–17]). This statement may have been inspired by the section of the *Republic* in which Plato chronicles the decline of democracy toward anarchy and tyranny (562d6–e1). If this is Alfarabi's final view on democracy even when it is still healthy, then democracy can hardly be considered a viable form of government.

Alfarabi's most extreme statement about the weakness of democratic governance should not be dismissed, but it does need to be modified, since Alfarabi often seems to retract it in the surrounding passages. Democracy, he argues, is based in principle on complete freedom: and yet "one [inhabitant] has authority over another or over someone else only insofar as he does what removes that person's freedom" (*Political Regime* 51.113 [99.9–10]). This statement represents the first hint that in practice democracy does

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000029 Published online by Cambridge University Press

have a government that intrudes on the freedom of its inhabitants. This government may be based on "any chance one of the things that we have mentioned," by which Alfarabi presumably means the other ignorant goods of necessities, money, pleasure, honor, or domination (51.113 [99.13–14]). The implication is that inhabitants of a democracy may be prepared to give up a portion of their freedom for the sake of a government that provides them with some of the other ignorant goods. This, I believe, is the observation that enables Alfarabi to elaborate the various kinds of democratic rulership, all of which temper to some extent the prevailing equality, freedom, and anarchy.

Alfarabi follows his suggestion that democracy may have neither ruler nor ruled with a "yet,"[13] implying an immediate change in approach. He proceeds by saying that some inhabitants of a democracy are more praiseworthy and honorable than others (51.114 [99.18]). There seems to be a noticeable difference between democratic principle, which insists on rigid equality, and democratic practice, which yields to the necessity of hierarchy and rule. Alfarabi does not hesitate to speak of three kinds of democratic rulers, each of whom has its own peculiar relationship to the ruled (51–52.114 [99.18–100.10]).

The first kind of ruler is able to effectively govern the democratic masses. This praiseworthy ruler, "the honored, superior (*afḍal*), and obeyed" among them, protects the freedom and desires of the people from their enemies, while restricting himself to the necessary goods (51.114 [99.18–100.2]; cf. 52.117 [101.12–14]). This ruler introduces elements from the association of honor (47.97ff. [89.14]) into the city, persuading its inhabitants to regard him as more virtuous (*afḍal*) than themselves and thereby forget the city's fundamental principle of equality. He is the somewhat pale democratic equivalent of the greatest ruler of the city of honor, who accomplishes glorious deeds for his people while demanding nothing but honor in return (48.101 [92.6–13]). In contemporary parlance, Alfarabi argues that only strong and unwavering leadership can maintain effective government in the face of the unbridled desires, seething diversity, and belief in equality that prevail in a democratic city.

Another kind of democratic ruler is considerably weaker. The people give him more honor and money than he gives them and therefore consider themselves superior (*afḍal*) to him (51.114 [100.5–6]).[14] Alfarabi will later suggest that if the people are dissatisfied with the ruler, they depose him, usually

[13]The Arabic expression *illā anna* could perhaps be rendered more strongly as "except that."

[14]Mahdi describes these rulers as "functionaries who perform services for which they receive adequate financial honors or remunerations" (Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*, 145). While his general description is correct, the use of the term "functionaries" risks making this chaotic arrangement sound more ordered and bureaucratic than it actually is.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000029 Published online by Cambridge University Press

by violent means (52.117 [101.15–16]): in the case of a ruler who is more dependent on the people than the people are on him, this could be done rather easily. It is probably this kind of rulership that would be most susceptible to bribery from the people, who are inclined to grant power to the highest bidder (52.116 [101.9–11]). A third kind of democratic ruler falls somewhere in between these two extremes, giving the people whom he rules more or less the same amount of goods as he receives from them, thus establishing himself only as their equal (51.114 [100.2–5]). He stands somewhere in between the effective, first kind of ruler and the third kind, who is in effect ruled by the democratic masses.

One may conclude from Alfarabi's description of rulership in democracy that such a government can flourish so long as the first and best kind of democratic ruler governs it. But Alfarabi implies that a series of these rulers is unlikely. It is precisely this praiseworthy kind of ruler who will succeed in passing down his office to his hereditary descendants (52.114 [100.6–8]). This observation confirms that Alfarabi's democracy is in fact a monarchy, and one likely to remain hereditary as long as the succession is peaceful. The fragility of this monarchy lies in the eventual weakness of its heirs, who will survive on fond recollections of their ancestors and govern according to the passions of the people (52.114 [100.7–8]). A state of affairs resembling mob rule or anarchy, in which the people really do govern their rulers, seems bound to occur at some point (52.114 [100.8–9]). Equality between ruler and ruled resumes, befitting the principle of democracy, but it is hardly a blessing. Democracy will eventually come to be governed by a democratic ruler of the weakest kind.

The claim that democracy is in fact a form of monarchy may at first appear strange. It should become less so if we remind ourselves that "democracy" is an imperfect translation of the Arabic expression *madīna jamāʻiyya*, since the later does not signify any direct popular rule. Moreover, even if the people never rule Alfarabi's democracy directly, they often appear to rule it indirectly. Should the rulers run afoul of the passions of the people, they risk being violently deposed and even killed (52.117 [101.15–16]).[15] The tool of popular authority is not elections but riots, the threat of which should be enough to keep the ruler perpetually on edge.

This being said, Alfarabi's democracy is certainly less anarchic than Plato's. As Khalidi points out, the most severe Platonic allegations against democracy, such as vigilante war-making and unenforced death sentences (*Republic* 557e3–4, 558a4–9), are not repeated by Alfarabi.[16] Alfarabi nevertheless raises serious questions about democracy's political viability, which Khalidi

[15]Alfarabi employs here the participle of the verb *iḍṭarab*, which in modern Arabic had come to signify riots.

[16]Khalidi, "Al-Fārābī on the Democratic City," 386.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000029 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tends to underestimate.[17] A government characterized by frequently seesawing rulership over an unruly populace is unlikely to serve as a model of strength and stability.[18] This problem becomes even more serious when democracy is considered in relation to its neighbors.

Democracy among the Ignorant Cities

Democracy has thus far been considered in a foreign policy vacuum. But any actual democratic city is surrounded by other governments, not all of which are necessarily friendly or democratic. How would a democracy interact with, and measure up to, such governments? This question, on which Alfarabi received little guidance from Plato, has been equally neglected by Najjar, Mahdi, and Khalidi.

An important hint about democracy's unusual character can be gleaned from the manner in which Alfarabi introduces it. At the beginning of the account of each particular ignorant city, the cities of necessity, wealth, pleasure, honor, and tyranny are all called not only cities (*madīna*) but also associations (*ijtimāʿ*) (*Political Regime* 46.94 [88.4], 47.95 [88.14], 47.96 [89.7], 47.97 [89.14], 49.104 [94.5]). This latter term is significant because associations include not only cities, but also communities larger and smaller than them (37.64 [69.16–70.4]).[19] The one exception is democracy, which is introduced

[17]Colmo also emphasizes democracy's virtues rather than its vices: Alfarabi "includes democracy among the most virtuous of the ignorant regimes." Colmo then acknowledges how dependent Alfarabi's democracy is on the goods praised by the multitude (Colmo, *Alfarabi as Founder*, 94). He thus points to an interesting tension on which he does not elaborate. Miriam Galston states more unambiguously the tensions within democracy, which show "that the political community productive of the greatest evil can be productive of the greatest good." But Galston, like Colmo, does not pursue the details. See Miriam Galston, *Politics and Excellence: The Political Philosophy of Alfarabi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 179.

[18]Majid Fakhry's matter-of-fact summary of the passage does not overlook this point: "Freedom in this city, verging on lawlessness, eventually generates a variety of perverse traits, pursuits, and desires, leading ultimately to widespread division and chaos" (Majid Fakhry, *Al-Fārābi, Founder of Islamic Neo-Platonism* [Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2002], 110).

[19]Alfarabi's terminology on this point is not as clear and unambiguous as one might hope. In the passage just cited from the *Political Regime* (37.64 [69.16–70.4]), he uses the term *ijtimāʿ* to signify associations smaller than a city, and *jamāʿa* to signify associations larger than a city. Both terms share the same root and the difference in meaning is not evident from the context. Futhermore, in a parallel work that is often called the *Virtuous City*, Alfarabi uses *ijtimāʿ* to signify all kinds of communities, including national and multinational communities larger than a city. See Alfarabi, *Alfarabi on the Perfect State* (*Kitāb Mabādiʾ Arāʾ Ahl al-Madīna al-Fāḍila*), trans. Richard Walzer (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1985), 228.11–13. The term *ijtimāʿ* in the discussion of the ignorant governments (*Political Regime* 46.94 [88.4], 47.95 [88.14], 47.96 [89.7], 47.97

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000029 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as a city but not as an association (51.113 [99.5–7]). An earlier, more general list of these associations follows a similar pattern. Democracy is called an association here, along with the other types of ignorant government, but it alone is said to exist in "a city," rather than "in cities" (46.93 [88.1–3]).[20] The other associations are thus presented as encompassing many cities, while democracy incorporates only one city. The significance of this distinction lies in the fact that according to a definition of city and nation laid down earlier in the *Political Regime* "many cities" could signify at least a nation, or maybe even a multinational empire (37.64 [70.3–4]). Democracy is unique among the ignorant associations as the only one restricted to a single city, while the others may extend over a far larger territory. The reasons for this anomaly are far from obvious, and require some careful consideration.

The easiest way for political entities to expand their boundaries is through war. Alfarabi explains how most of the ignorant associations are inclined to pursue an extremely aggressive foreign policy. I wish to elaborate here on a point that has already been made by Joshua Parens, concerning the proclivity of the ignorant regimes for the conquest and the domination of foreigners.[21] This tendency is particularly obvious in the case of the associations of honor and domination. The noblest of the rulers of the association of honor seek both present and future fame among the nations for their magnificent and generous deeds These extravagances will have to be funded somehow. Alfarabi suggests taxation, or else attacking neighboring groups for the sake of plunder (48.101–102 [92.6–17]).[22] Alfarabi displays here the impeccable realism for which he is rarely given credit.[23] He perceives the link between honor among the nations and conquest: how many ancient and medieval

[89.14], 49.104 [94.5]) seems to follow the usage of the *Virtuous City*. The subsequent discussion is intended to show that these imperial governments must in most cases be larger than a city.

[20]In the case of the tyrannical city, one of the manuscripts reads "in the tyrannical cities" and the others read "in the tyrannical city" (Alfarabi, *al-Siyāsa al-Madaniyya*, ed. Najjar, 88.2–3, n3). According to the interpretation proposed here, the former reading makes more contextual sense. Butterworth seems to agree: he translates "the association of domination in the despotic cities" and "the association of freedom in the democratic city" (*Political Regime* 46.93 [88.2–3]).

[21]Parens, *Introducing Alfarabi*, 83.

[22]Alfarabi anticipates here a famous remark of Machiavelli: "As for the prince who goes out with his armies, who feeds on booty, pillage, and ransom and manages on what belongs to someone else, liberality is necessary, otherwise he would not be followed by his soldiers" (Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey Mansfield [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998], 64).

[23]Patricia Crone is a notable exception. She laments that in the Islamic world only Averroes and Ibn Khaldun followed up on Alfarabi's incipient efforts to scientifically analyze actual human societies. See Patricia Crone, "Alfarabi's Imperfect Constitutions," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 57 (2004): 222–24.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000029 Published online by Cambridge University Press

rulers ever attained great glory without becoming great conquerors? Yet the line between honorable and tyrannical acts seems at times to be rather thin, as indicated by the association of honor's inclination toward imperious behavior (49.103 [98.5]).[24] The association of domination is, not surprisingly, even more addicted to the conquest of its neighbors than the city of honor: in a city whose principle is domination, joining together to dominate others is certainly more appealing to its inhabitants than being dominated themselves (49.107–50.107 [96.1–2], 51.110 [98.5]).

The associations of necessity, wealth, and pleasure appear at first to be relatively benign. Yet Alfarabi begins by giving only brief summaries of them, from which nothing can be inferred about their foreign policy. Furthermore, even these summaries include the disturbing hint that robbery is often regarded as a legitimate means of subsistence (47.94–95 [88.4–89.6]). Alfarabi reintroduces the cities of wealth and pleasure, rather ominously, in the section devoted to tyranny, and both of them turn out to be engaged in the domination of others (50.111–51.112 [97.7–99.6]; cf. 52.118 [102.5]). They are driven to attack their neighbors by a lively sense of the superiority of their own way of life, and by the simple fact that the wealth and pleasure they seek are best sustained by honor and conquest. Meanwhile, a city of domination that succeeds in conquest will inevitably acquire wealth and indulge in pleasure (50.108 [96.18–97.1]).

In the somewhat disturbing account of ignorant associations in the *Political Regime*, war seems to prevail over peace, and the distinction between the various ignorant associations becomes quite blurred. Alfarabi suggests in the *Selected Aphorisms* that all actual ignorant regimes consist of indefinite mixtures of the major prototypes, none of which ever exist in their pure form.[25] His last word on the ignorant associations in the *Political Regime* explains one such common mixture. The ignorant associations are often ruled by peoples such as Turks and Arabs, whose sybaritic habits developed in the wilderness.[26] Even when transplanted to the city, they never overcome their addiction to pleasure and women. They consecrate, and eventually dissipate, much of their public bravado as glorious conquerors for the sake of this low, private end, so that they and their households are eventually ruled by women (53.119 [102.12–103.13]). Alfarabi alludes here unmistakably to the harem, a particularly ancient institution in his part of the world, which was firmly established well before the emergence of Islam. The general conquers gloriously on the battlefield in order to retire to the private pleasure

[24]Parens, *Introducing Alfarabi*, 82.

[25]Alfarabi, *Alfarabi: The Political Writings*, 58.

[26]The term "Arab" in classical times normally meant Bedouin, and that is almost certainly the case here. Alfarabi may have been of Turkish origins himself, so he would have known their habits quite well. See Muhsin Mahdi, "Al-Fārābī," in *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, ed. Charles Coulston Gillispie (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 4:523.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000029 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the harem. Let this suffice, then, for the four "associations in cities"; their love of pleasure, wealth, and honor among the nations, as well as the habits of the peoples from which their rulers come, all tend to push them toward imperial designs that recognize neither political nor ethnic boundaries.

Where does this leave democracy? Among the ignorant regimes, it is very much an outlier. To repeat, in Alfarabi's account democracy is the only kind of government that is called a city but not an association, and therefore restricted to a single city. Can democracy expand in a way that would allow it to keep up with its more aggressive neighbors, or at least defend itself against them? This question looms especially large because Alfarabi does present the democratic city as continually growing (52.115 [100.14]). Its large size and population risk bringing the democratic city into conflict with its neighbors, as well as rendering it an alluring object for would-be conquerors.

The democratic city does attain extraordinary success in a certain sense. On this score a bit of Arabic wordplay is revealing. We recall that the expression commonly translated as "democratic city" is *madīna jamāʿiyya*. The adjective *jamāʿiyya* shares the same root as *ijtimāʿ*, the term commonly translated "association." Following this important etymological link, we may be tempted to translate the expression *madīna jamāʿiyya* as "associative city," although the demands of both precedent and literal English probably prevent us from doing so.[27] While the word "association" does not appear in the account of democracy, the verb derived from it (*ijtimaʿ*) appears twice, and recurs in the shorter description of democracy in the *Virtuous City* (*Political Regime* 51.113 [99.12], 52.115 [100.18]; *Virtuous City* 314.2).[28] The point is that all of the cities, human passions, and ways of life will associate with one another in this city. In this respect, it is not merely one city, but many different cities, mixed together and barely distinguished from one another (*Political Regime* 52.115 [100.16–17]). Many nations will flock to live in it, and its population will increase beyond bounds (52.115 [100.14]). While the noblest of the rulers of honor becomes famous among the nations for his great exploits (48.101 [92.14]), the democratic city becomes renowned among them for its freedom and openness to newcomers. The associations of honor and domination seek to conquer and subjugate the nations, but the democratic city receives them into its bosom with open arms. This emphasis on untrammeled population growth shows that Alfarabi, unlike Montesquieu and his disciples, equates democracy not with the smaller cities most common in pre-Roman antiquity,[29] but with vast, multiethnic metropolises.

[27]Butterworth has appended an extremely helpful footnote, in which he offers the alternative translation of "associational city" (Alfarabi, *Political Regime* 46.93n18).

[28]This etymological connection would be very hard to render into readable English. Butterworth translates this verb as "brought together" and then "come together."

[29]See, for example, Montesquieu, *De l'Esprit des lois*, ed. R. Derathé (Paris: Garnier, 1973), 1.8.16 (135).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000029 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Yet democracy remains restricted to a city. Despite its frenetic internal growth, its external expansion is limited by its indifference toward offensive war.[30] Parens asserts that all of the ignorant regimes engage in conquest and domination.[31] This observation is generally apt and true, but does it hold in the case of democracy? Alfarabi is well aware that no democracy could maintain itself without mustering enough force to combat its enemies. He speaks twice of resistance to these enemies (*Political Regime* 51.114 [100.1], 52.117 [101.13]). In both cases, the context is clearly defensive: the ruler is expected to guard the goods that the city already possesses, rather than acquire new ones. Freedom and equality, the highest goods in a democracy, are omitted from the list of the goods that impel their devotees to conquest (52.118 [102.5]). Finally, the city's openness to all things foreign (52.115 [100.18]) is bound to weaken its desire for the domination of foreigners.

One might object that all of the ignorant cities, ways of life, and rulerships are said to exist in the democratic city (*Political Regime* 51.113 [99.12–14]; cf. Averroes, *On Plato's "Republic"* 83.18–22); this would have to include, among other things, the city of domination. But even if the desire for conquest and domination remains present in some of the city's inhabitants,[32] it might risk being crowded out by other, more pacific inclinations, such as love of freedom and the arts. Although democracy does not adopt love of peace as an official doctrine, it is the ignorant city closest to the ignorant opinion that champions peace among all humans and authorizes only defensive war (*Virtuous City* 310.12ff.).

Democracy does engage in defensive war. But we might also ask whether any democratic ruler of the sort described by Alfarabi, whose authority in general seems so tenuous, would in fact be capable of guarding the freedom and desires of his people effectively, especially in the face of a determined foreign enemy. The ruler's precarious situation would be further exacerbated if he had to face domestic enemies as well. In the first reference to the city's enemies, they are explicitly described as external. However, the suggestion that the ruler might also need to defend "the differing desires of some [of the inhabitants] from others" (*Political Regime* 51.114 [100.1]) seems to point to the existence of domestic strife as well. In the second reference to enemies, they are not even qualified as external, thus strengthening our suspicion about the presence of internal enemies (52.117 [101.13]). Indeed, it is reasonable to infer that mounting internal strife would rank among the multitude of evils that fester within a democratic city (52.115 [101.3–4]). Such conflicts might further constrain the beleaguered ruler from mustering the force

[30]Parens, *Introducing Alfarabi*, 83.

[31]Unlike Rome or even Athens, Alfarabi's democratic city does not establish an empire. Since authors such as Thucydides and Cicero seem to have left no traces in medieval Islam, we may wonder how much Alfarabi would have been aware of these empires.

[32]As Averroes suggests explicitly: see Averroes, *On Plato's "Republic,"* 83.22.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000029 Published online by Cambridge University Press

necessary to fend off foreign invaders. Would a democratic city, led by a relatively weak ruler, plagued by internal dissent, and preferring a plethora of peaceful activities to war, really be able to defend itself against a determined, better-organized enemy? In a world abounding in associations of honor and domination, this is more than a theoretical question. Alfarabi's refusal to answer it means that his praise of democracy retains a certain wistful air.

Does democracy represent any actual city? Alfarabi does not say so. As usual, he scrupulously limits his references to any particular places or peoples. However, the enormous size and diversity of democracy does recall Baghdad,[33] which had hundreds of thousands of inhabitants from many different nations.[34] The flocking of the nations to a burgeoning democratic city might well include Alfarabi's own journey to Baghdad from his remote non-Arab origins.[35] But if the diverse populace and intellectual ferment of Alfarabi's democracy is highly reminiscent of Baghdad, so too are its military struggles. The old imperial capital was mired in terminal political decline. The Abbasid Caliphate that built it had lost most of the empire that once extended from Morocco to the borders of India, and was itself in the process of being taken over by Turkish and Daylami mercenaries (*Political Regime* 53.119 [103.6]).[36] The political turmoil would eventually affect Alfarabi himself, who was forced to leave Baghdad for Syria and Egypt toward the end of his life.[37] The implication is that the democratic cities most likely to exist in the regions known to Alfarabi would resemble Abbasid Baghdad in its later centuries, a vast imperial capital that had attracted inhabitants from half the world but lost its own military genius. It

[33]Najjar's initial claim that Alfarabi discusses democracy "in abstraction" seems to deny this connection. And yet Najjar proceeds to note Alfarabi's talent for "authentic contemporary description" (Najjar, "Democracy in Islamic Political Philosophy," 117–18). Does Najjar imply that Alfarabi is alluding to Baghdad? Khalidi discusses the connection between democracy and Baghdad much less ambiguously (Khalidi, "Al-Fārābī on the Democratic City," 391–92).

[34]It has been estimated that Baghdad may have had as many as 1.5 million inhabitants at its height. These were "a mixture of different nations, colours, and creeds. . . . [Baghdad's] poets, historians, and scholars are too numerous to mention" (A. A. Duri, "Baghdad," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* [Leiden: Brill, 1960], 1:898–99).

[35]Alfarabi was almost certainly born somewhere in Turkestan around 870. He probably studied in Bukhara and Marv before settling in Baghdad, and later spent several years studying in Constantinople and Haran. He then returned to Baghdad sometime after 910 and spent the most productive part of his career there. For as thorough a biography of Alfarabi as the fragmentary character of the sources permits, see Mahdi, "Al-Fārābī," 523–26.

[36]For a readable and informative account of Baghdad around the time of Alfarabi, see Joel L. Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: The Cultural Revival during the Buyid Age* (Leiden: E.J. Brill), 1992, 31ff.

[37]Mahdi, "Al-Fārābī," 524.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000029 Published online by Cambridge University Press

continued to govern the remnants of a decaying empire that had been acquired under the more warlike governments of a bygone era, but struggled to defend itself against the repeated encroachments of enemies.[38] Considerations of this sort lead us to suspect that however much Alfarabi may have cherished the freedom, diversity, and intellectual ferment of the democratic city, he did not regard it as a bulwark against the dangers posed by governments that love honor and domination. Alfarabi clearly thought himself lucky that Baghdad's period of cultural effervescence had lasted long enough so that, "as time draws on," poetry, rhetoric, and philosophy could flourish within it (52.115 [101.1]).

Despite Alfarabi's unmistakable allusions to Baghdad, it would be wrong to assume that his democracy is a purely historical representation of that metropolis. Since Alfarabi does not explicitly name Baghdad or any other city, one should be quite hesitant about such an assumption. Averroes, in contrast, associates democracy with "the Muslim kings of our time" and then Cordoba of the previous generation.[39] Moreover, there are aspects of Alfarabi's democracy that outdo any existing city. Does Baghdad or any other city tolerate equally every sort of sexual intercourse and upbringing, as well as every kind of rhetoric, wisdom, and poetry (*Political Regime* 52.115 [100.14–101.2])? One must imagine homosexuality, brothels, nonconventional families, and every sort of religious heterodoxy. So complete an absence of public education and morality seems unrealistic. Religion and morals in Baghdad were indeed regulated by a *muḥtasib*, a public official whose job was not only to prevent cheating in markets but also to watch over mosques and baths. The city also faced frequent pressure from strict Hanbalite groups to "improve morals by force."[40] These straightforward historical facts suffice to show that Alfarabi's freewheeling democracy cannot simply be equated with Baghdad.

Alfarabi's democracy represents an exaggeration of Baghdad just as Plato's democracy represents an exaggeration of Athens. Athens may have been more permissive than most Greek cities, but it certainly did not allow its citizens to make peace or war whenever they wanted, or its criminals to walk the land like a hero (*Republic* 557e2–558a8). Yet while Plato's exaggeration of the political licentiousness of Athenian democracy makes it appear ridiculous, Alfarabi's exaggeration of the moral licentiousness of Baghdad makes it appear enticing. Who wouldn't dream of living in a city that permits such religious, intellectual, and erotic fulfillment? No wonder such a city is deemed happy and beloved of its citizens (*Political Regime* 52.115 [100.11–13]).

[38] Averroes's democracy also suffers from military weakness, stemming from the unwillingness of the people to either pay taxes or fight wars (Averroes, *On Plato's* Republic, 84.17–85.7).

[39] Averroes, *On Plato's "Republic,"* 84.14–15, 96.25–26.

[40] Duri, "Baghdad," 898, 900.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000029 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Alfarabi's democracy is so charming precisely because it promises more freedom than any actual government could ever hope to deliver.[41]

What, then, is the purpose of Alfarabi's hyperbole? His praise of democracy's unique capacity for artistic accomplishment, intellectual freedom, and erotic fulfillment remains alluring to this day. These are delights that Alfrabi never mentions in conjunction with the other ignorant associations: he says nothing about any intellectual activity in them, and the sexual activity in them, while plentiful, is not nearly as diverse (51.112 [99.5–6]). Perhaps Alfarabi hopes that his beautiful speech will somehow penetrate the harems of the military rulers as well, and convince the men and women who will rule the Islamic world for the foreseeable future to encourage philosophy, art, and related activities even while devoting most of their time to pleasure and war.

Democracy, Philosophy, and the Virtuous City

The foregoing account of Alfarabi's pessimism concerning the future of democracy appears to have overlooked an important point. Alfarabi claims that the virtuous city and rulership are more likely to emerge from a democracy and the city of necessity than from other ignorant cities (*Political Regime* 52.117 [102.3–4]). Khalidi emphasizes the significance of this claim, and suggests that it has no parallel in Plato. But Khalidi's interpretation of it as a serious proposal for a "lobbying group" of the virtuous within democracy is rather optimistic. As Khalidi himself admits, Alfarabi "does not tell us how this might actually be done."[42] Furthermore, Khalidi ignores Alfarabi's observation that even if a virtuous ruler were somehow to take power in a democracy, he would be quickly deposed, since his austere ways and desire to direct the people toward virtue would prevent him from ministering to the sundry caprices of the democratic masses (52.117 [101.14–16]). Democracy is likely to succumb to foreign conquest or internal anarchy well before it ever permits the few virtuous people within it to rule. But this serves simply to raise the question: What does Alfarabi's statement about the possible emergence of the virtuous city from a democracy mean?

On this particular point, I believe that Najjar's interpretation of this passage is somewhat more tenable than Khalidi's. Observing the difficulties that we have indicated, Najjar concludes that Alfarabi "does not regard the

[41]I therefore see more irony in Alfarabi's praise of the happiness of democracy than Khalidi does. Khalidi also takes Alfarabi's comments about unregulated sexuality rather literally (Khalidi, "Al-Fārābī on the Democratic City," 386–87).

[42]Khalidi, "Al-Fārābī on the Democratic City," 390. How the virtuous city emerges from the city of necessity is rather mysterious. I cannot examine this question in any detail. It seems that the virtuous city emerges either from extreme diversity and luxury or bare, uncorrupt necessity.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000029 Published online by Cambridge University Press

establishment of a virtuous regime as highly probable, because the truly virtuous. . . *are not made rulers*." The virtuous philosophers within the democracy should "lead a happy life" themselves and "rule or exercise influence through education. Uncrowned, they are the true kings."[43] Najjar is presumably alluding to an earlier passage in the *Political Regime* in which Alfarabi speaks of "an association of these [virtuous] kings at a single moment in a single city, a single nation, or many nations. . . like a single king due to the agreement in their endeavors, purposes, opinions, and ways of life" (43.82 [80.12–14]). By this peculiar statement, Alfarabi cannot possibly mean kings in any conventional sense. Alfarabi might therefore mean philosophers, whom, following Plato, he identifies with kings in the *Attainment of Happiness*.[44] In pursuit of their shared intellectual interests and way of life, philosophers will gladly exchange speeches and ideas, both within a single city, across the nations, and from one generation to another.

What would this imply in the context of democracy? Najjar's statement that these philosophers are the true kings is slightly misleading in this regard, since the word "king" never occurs in Alfarabi's discussion of democracy. Alfarabi speaks rather of rulers, and makes clear that the philosophers will never be accepted into their ranks. But another community that flourishes within democracy may describe the philosophers quite well. We recall that Alfarabi describes the democratic city as a city that "comes to be many cities, not distinguished from one another but interwoven with one another, the parts of one interspersed among the parts of another" (52.115 [100.16–18]). This statement only makes sense if "city" is an equivocal term, referring both to a geographically contiguous settlement encompassing many neighborhoods and quarters (37.64 [69.17–70.4]) and a group of people who share a common way of life. It is according to the latter definition that the notion of a virtuous city emerging from the democratic city needs to be understood. Now democracy is a government that attracts migrants from many nations: it could thereby serve as a prime destination for philosophers from all over the world, including Alfarabi from central Asia. Arriving from distant climes in search of education and wisdom, these philosophers could establish a virtuous city within a city over a long period of time. The virtuous city that emerges in a democracy would therefore describe the virtuous city of Alfarabi and his associates.[45] Such an interpretation is corroborated by what

[43]Najjar, "Democracy in Islamic Political Philosophy," 120.

[44]Mahdi translates *malik* as "prince" rather than "king," which seems somewhat misleading in the context of the present argument. See Alfarabi, *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, trans. Muhsin Mahdi (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962), 43.18–19.

[45]Mahdi implies a similar interpretation. He does not say that democracy helps establish the rule of the philosopher, but rather that it allows him "to pursue his desire in relative freedom" (Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*, 146).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000029 Published online by Cambridge University Press

little we know of Alfarabi's life: he never tried to rule Baghdad, but through a lifetime of quiet pedagogy became one of its most influential inhabitants, whose name would be remembered long after the oblivion of its lackluster rulers.

If this interpretation is correct, then Alfarabi's claim about the virtuous city within democracy does in fact have a Platonic precedent: "The man who wishes to organize a city [should] go to a city under a democracy. He would choose the sort that pleases him. . . and thus establish the regime."[46] Just as the conversation about the various kinds of cities in the *Republic* could only take place in Athens, where these cities could be viewed and examined in all their diversity, so the *Political Regime* could have been written only in a city such as Baghdad.[47] In that teeming, cosmopolitan capital, Alfarabi could observe the inhabitants of each and every city intertwined, thus permitting him to compose a description of every kind of government, virtuous and ignorant. On this point, Alfarabi and Plato are not nearly as far apart as Khalidi seems to think.

Alfarabi and Current Debates about Democracy

The difference between ancient and modern democracy has long served as a common theme of discussion, but could we gain anything by adding the democracy of Alfarabi into the mix? It is at odds with what we normally understand by democracy, both ancient and modern. Yet it was appropriate to Alfarabi's time, which knew only the rule of caliphs, sultans, and armies, and lacked experience of elections or assemblies of any sort. Alfarabi makes no effort to conceal this fact, presenting democracy as a weak, tolerant form of monarchy. The popular support enjoyed by the democratic ruler may be genuine; however, it depends not on electoral or constitutional legitimacy in the modern sense, but rather on the ruler's ability to win over the people by giving them exactly what they want. When they cease to get what they want, the people might riot and violently overthrow the ruler. For these reasons, Khalidi's attempt to find strong similarities between Alfarabi's *madīna jamā'iyya* and modern democracy seems rather anachronistic.[48] Yet does the avoidance of such anachronisms mean consigning Alfarabi's democracy to the dustbin of historical curiosities? It is possible, after all, that what was entirely appropriate for Alfarabi's time has become entirely irrelevant for ours. I conclude by attempting to dispel this concern.

[46]Plato, *Republic* 557d1–9; cf. Khalidi, "Al-Fārābī on the Democratic City," 380.

[47]Fakhry notices the similarity between Alfarabi and Plato on this point. Both thinkers present democracy as "fertile ground for the emergence of every type of constitution" (Fakhry, *Al-Fārābi, Founder of Islamic Neo-Platonism*, 111).

[48]Khalidi, "Al-Fārābī on the Democratic City," 389–90.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000029 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The most memorable aspect of Alfarabi's account of democracy is his description of its intellectual, artistic, and sexual freedom. These attractive features of democracy set it apart from the sternness of most other forms of government. Alfarabi's ode to human freedom and creativity stands as a countercharm to the dreary repressiveness characteristic of so many human governments. Yet Alfarabi is hardly swept away by his own conjuring. Indeed, we have seen how these qualities of the democratic city are exaggerated beyond the point of probability. And while democracy may be the freest and most beautiful form of government, Alfarabi indicates that timocracy and tyranny are the most suited to win battles. Alfarabi thus establishes an inverse relationship between freedom and military power. If freedom can be understood as the good of the individual, and military power as the good of the community, then this conclusion elaborates on Galston's remark that Alfarabi's account of democracy "widens the potential chasm between the good of the individual and the good of the community."[49] Modern democracy, in ways that we cannot discuss here, has attempted to bridge this chasm, and the United States has always prided itself on being both free and strong. Yet we also admit that these two desirable qualities may in certain circumstances come into tension: one complains about the weakness of the American president, and hears frequent grumbling about the greater decisiveness of autocracies such as Russia and China. In the midst of these ongoing debates, Alfarabi's somewhat critical views of the relationship between freedom and military strength deserve to be heard.

We may be somewhat averse to Alfarabi's observation that riots are the most effective tool of ensuring popular influence in politics. By allowing popular discontent to be expressed in regular elections, modern democracies hope to render the very notion of riots superfluous. It is safe to say that only a small minority of American democrats continue to regard riots as a legitimate way to influence policy and public opinion, let alone depose elected representatives. Yet since Alfarabi's democracy has no elections, this hardly refutes his point. And if we turn to Alfarabi's own region, we find that riots remain the most potent way for the people to make their voice heard. Beginning in 2011, a number of Middle Eastern dictators have been deposed in a process initiated by angry public protests. This seemed only natural in countries that as of yet had absolutely no democratic institutions through which the popular will could be voiced. And yet in most cases it has not led to democracy or even stability. Chaos prevails in Libya, civil war rages in Syria, while military rule has returned to Egypt. While popular riots may force unwanted rulers to step down, they cannot guarantee the establishment of elective institutions, especially in countries that have so little historical experience of them. Democratic freedom as we understand it remains as elusive in most parts

[49]Galston, *Politics and Excellence*, 179.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000029 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the contemporary Middle East as it was in Alfarabi's time. The peculiar manner in which popular power is exercised in Alfarabi's monarchic *madīna jamā'iyya* serves as a useful reminder of the complete historical absence of any institutions that we today would call democratic in the heart of the Islamic world.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670515000029 Published online by Cambridge University Press