

Does Covid-19 Threaten Global Democracy?

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Abstract

This paper aims to raise awareness over the occurrence of citizens' infringement rights to freedom and democracy violations occurring in the harsh times of the pandemic globally. Combatting this virus requires sharp decisions in terms of public health respecting international health recommendations. Governments must protect human rights and the value of democracy in each country to maintain public trust and gain people's cooperation. In the health crisis and building the new future the fight against COVID-19 will not be effective and might lead to authoritarian measures. Authoritarian regimes might use strength, fear and fraud to control their people. On the other hand, democracies act in transparency, information-wise and their public legitimacy. When citizens start losing their faith in the legality of democracy for not functioning effectively, the dangerous risk of democracy failure appears.

Without an well educated and informed population these governments might use the new coronavirus pandemic to promote their power abandoning democratic norms and the rule of law on behalf of drastic restraints that might remain permanent.

Key words: democracy, pandemic, corruption, political authoritarianism, human rights and liberties.

J.E.L. classification: A13, D73, D8, I18.

1. Introduction

This paper aims to raise awareness over the occurrence of citizens' infringement rights to freedom and democracy violations occurring in the harsh times of the pandemic globally.

In times of COVID-19 pandemic when the disease is affecting more and more citizens, spreading rapidly all over the world, saving lives and controlling the virus transmission should normally be the first concern of all governments, international organisations, business communities, etc. Combatting this virus requires sharp decisions in terms of public health respecting international health recommendations.

Meanwhile, the current pandemic also impacts democracy, equality and human rights, in many states all over the world, due to governments' actions that will count for a long time. Along with investments in healthcare, social support like financial incentives, incomes substitutions, public health measures also includes restrictions on civil society, which are justified when fighting to combat the virus spreading, and include key rights infringements, like freedom of movement. People need to ensure that these restrictions are time-based and are legally imposed. Governments must protect human rights and the value of democracy in each country to maintain public trust and gain people's cooperation. In the health crisis and building the new future the fight against COVID-19 will not be effective and might lead to authoritarian measures. One must not wait until the pandemic passes to stand out in front of human rights threats and make governments accountable in front of their decisions.

Thesaurus defines democracy as a form of government where the people holds the fundamental power and practices it directly or "by their elected agents under a free electoral system". (thesaurus.com)

This article work encompasses qualitative research, like qualitative content analysis, discourse analysis, narrative analysis.

2. Theoretical background

China and Vietnam used the communist ideology almost 30 years for their transition to market economies and bureaucratic capitalism, firstly as a model for progress targeting the eradication of their enormous underdevelopment and prepare the society from the agrarian changeover to modern and urban.

For surviving further, authoritarian and neo-authoritarian regimes get to detach their links from one ideology and show a wide-ranging ideology and diverse strategy. With such mixture of ideology, the desire of such authoritarian regimes to declare their flourishing corruption, the power of successful people and new meritocracy becomes more and more daring and we can acknowledge these phenomena in stagnating economies, where government system receives little or no menace from inside or outside. Their main value is the state and at the opposite way at the bottom of the pyramid of values is the human being with its rights and freedoms. (Nisnevich & Ryabov, 2017)

According to a study at the University of Virginia, globally one-third of the incumbent presidents who reached the end of their term resorted to a certain strategy of remaining in office and a large number of them surpassed their constitutional term of office, by constitutional amendment (Rwanda, China), requesting to a court to rewrite the constitution, changing the term limits (Sudan, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Honduras), designating a faithful agent for succession to be controlled thereafter (Russia, with Putin being the longest ruler on power using this strategy), delaying elections stating some kind of political uncertainty. (Versteeg et. al, 2019)

3. Findings. Covid-19 Challenges

Occidental countries are democratic states where the concept of freedom is very well known and felt by the people, so the governments cannot adopt restrictive measures that would inhibit the citizens' rights. They try to implement solutions that would respect their constitutions and legal limitations.

Authoritarian countries seem more appropriate to enforce lockdowns and impose physical distancing, while solid democracies better care for providing transparency, assuring access to information and coordination between public and civil efforts of the society. A legitimacy condition is the matter governments play politics in pandemic times to brace their standards.

Some of the political risks the pandemic brought are the authoritarian tendencies as many governments invoked emergency powers as a response to the crisis. Human rights violations have been recorded in many countries.

China and Iran, in their specific authoritarian way, did not disclose the scale of the crisis to their populations and the world. China silenced a doctor who tried to warn about the coronavirus and accused of whistleblowing and refused the WHO health help. China is facing a dramatic decline in democracy since last year, using the contact tracing apps and other digital surveillance technologies, discriminating minorities like Uyghurs and continued to act against democracy suppressing manifestations and ending up implementing the National Security Law applying in Hong Kong.

President Xi Jinping government developed a framework for monitoring people physically and virtually, allowing them to be tracked constantly, restricting their rights and freedoms under the pandemic measures.

Iran continued its flights towards and from China, including Wuhan, until the end of February, trying to cover it up by affirming it was sending humanitarian assistance. Iran was in desperate need for medical aid and started building mass graveyards for coronavirus victims but only declared the emergency state after the parliamentary elections took place on 21st of February. The

Iranian authorities did not report accurate death toll numbers and didn't succeed to apply defensive measures.

Asian democratic societies, South Korea, Taiwan and even Singapore, which is not a democracy could handle the coronavirus situation without imposing authoritarian measures, taking advantage of public legitimacy, capable health systems and by fast testing massively and monitoring the infected persons.

In Latin America countries a democratic decline was already installed and coronavirus put and emphasis over the existing corruption of governments.

4. Measures that were taken by authorities that violate citizens liberties or rights

El Salvador - More than 1200 people were arbitrarily forthwith arrested under the allegation of violating the quarantine orders in March 2020. The country's Supreme Court found the detentions unjustifiable.

Honduras - The government emitted a dictatorial decree imposing restrictions over the freedom of speech, with the justification of acting against spreading misinformation about the pandemic.

Venezuela - The country was in a humanitarian crisis before the Sars-Cov-2 virus, characterized by food shortage and basic products, lacking medical supplies, huge inflation and fiscal deficits. With the pandemic brought a breakdown on the oil price and Venezuela became the least prepared country to fight with the Covid-19.

Nicolas Maduro first declared a ban on protests in March, censoring all information about the virus, hiding real number of contagion cases and in-power government persecuted and confined journalists, opposition leaders and activists contesting the official statistics. Maduro, the self-declared president and Guaido, the interim president were urged to sign an agreement of collaboration on dealing with the pandemic and receiving external aid funds.

Argentina - The Argentinian armed forces play an important role in supporting the efforts of mitigating the COVID-19 crisis. The civilian authority needs to be served by the armed forces and not the opposite. The military forces on the streets to have a strict end time, avoiding the normalization of such measures especially in such countries with a history of military dictatorships.

Bolivia and Columbia - There are a poverty and hunger crisis that overcomes the risks of the pandemic.

Brasil - President Jair Bolsonaro encouraged social interactions and dismissed Covid-19 lockdown which led to his country acceding the second place in the top of the states with the worse pandemic reaction in the world. Since the president disregards all measures and medical advice and lack collaboration with his state governors, the country is facing its third minister of health from the beginning of the pandemic, after one resignation and one dismissal.

Europe discrepancy between Northern Europe (Germany, the Netherlands), and indebted Southern European countries (France, Italy, Spain) that might deal with economic failure

Poland had the presidential elections planned for 10 May, under lockdown. Andrzej Duda, the incumbent president of the authoritarian political party Law and Justice insisted for the idea of postal voting and no campaign allowed for the other candidates. This attack on judicial independence was not perceived well either inside or outside Poland. In the end, the vote did not take place, as a result of an agreement of the leaders from the ruling coalition, with no vote in Parliament or consultations with democratic institutions, a move that led to downgrading Poland from a consolidated democracy to a semi-consolidated democracy (Freedom House). Hungary, Serbia and Montenegro are referred to as a hybrid regime by the same institution.

Hungary's democracy was hit before the pandemic but under his parliament permission, president Viktor Orbán emitted a decree that allows him to rule for an indefinite term and gives him absolute executive power aiming to manage the crisis. First dictatorial European move after the 1933 Enabling Act of Adolf Hitler. Orbán established a strict censorship regime which led to people getting arrested for expressing their opinions on Facebook over the president handling the coronavirus, under the accusation of fake news. It was decided afterwards that there was no false information, only critics of the Orbán's government response to the pandemic.

Serbia – the government introduces draconian measures with authoritarian quarantine rules and curfew. The violent responses to lock down make us wonder over the Serbian democratic state.

Israel – Benjamin Netanyahu was accused of fraud, corruption and breach of trust at the end of 2019. Israel was already in a political turmoil due to ambiguous three elections in 12 months. Israelis protest over the antidemocratic coronavirus policies imposed by their prime minister and financial losses caused by the lockdown.

In **Russia** – doctors that used to treat patients infected with Covid-19 and expressed their opinions over Russia counter crisis measures, have fallen from windows (3 such cases in 10 days, balkaninsight.com)

India's caseload is the third in the world top Covid-19, after US and Brasil. Narendra Modi used the pandemic crisis to forward his fight against Muslims and especially oppressing the population of Kashmir. At the end of 2019, the ultra-nationalist government passed the Citizenship Amendment Act allowing minorities from neighbouring countries to apply for fast citizenship, except for Muslims.

India was politically unstable before COVID-19, a country where inequality and communalism prevailed. After it was under military lockdown for six months, artillery guns were brought in local communities of Kashmir, inducing panic besides the fear of contagion. Kashmiri people were oppressed, used gunfire in April, jailed people going for supplies and medicines, bringing allegations to journalists, beating medical staff, etc.

Poor people that had no resources to keep social distance and Muslims were accused of spreading the coronavirus. The lockdown was set with only 4 hours' notice in India, making it impossible for hundreds of thousands of migrant workers to reach home, by foot; some of them had to walk for hundreds of kilometres and part of them died on their journey. People got terrified of dying of hunger, not of coronavirus. A week after the lockdown, Modi imposed press censorship so he could install his government propaganda.

In February and March, only hundreds of thousands of children skipped their routine vital immunizations, including the tuberculosis treatments, due to lockdown (National Health Mission, 2020). The pandemic turned out into a humanitarian crisis for India

The United States is in an anti-democratic regime. Trump succeeded to politicize the pandemic. In 2018 he was declaring his admiration for president Xi Jinping changing by amendment his country constitution, being able to rule on the indefinite term and suggesting that they should try to do the same in the US (Brandon et al., 2020).

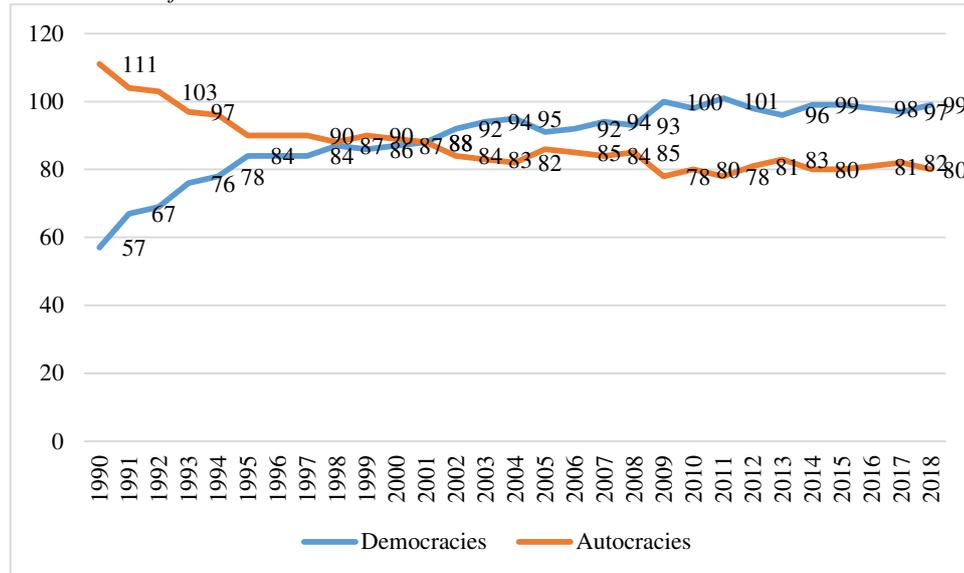
5. Results and Conclusions

In difficult times we notice autocratic tendencies among leaders of otherwise democratic and rule of law countries, including in the Americas. Autocratic-leaning political leaders often use emergency powers in times of crises to consolidate their powers. Because such leaders are usually in control of the majority of votes in their parliaments, the only constraint in most cases is an activist civil society bolstered by a free press. The latter is indispensable. And, whenever we see political leaders attacking the press we should take notice and defend press freedom.

Even in some democratic states, some political leaders have autocratic tendencies and use them in periods of crisis, taking advantage of the emergency state to reinforce their powers. Such leaders have control on the majority of votes in their parliaments, the only constraint in such a situation remains an activist civil society backed up by the free press. Liberty of the press must be protected no matter what, especially when politic leaders attack it.

We tend to believe that autocratic governments are outnumbered compared with the democratic ones but the real picture is painted red as much as it is blue. Below we the numbers for both democracies and autocracies in the world, after the 1990s.

Figure no. 1 Number of democracies and autocracies in the world



Source: Authors' selection from ourworldindata.org

In crisis times, governments need to find effective measures in little time, so they are allowed to get access to increased powers. Also, in such delicate times, politic leaders tend to be susceptible to their inborn inclinations. It's the moment when the civil society and free press must be more wary to maintain their rights and democratic liberty.

Populations from some of the world countries already found under pressure because of their essential health and economic threats to individual and collective existence in times of COVID-19, find themselves in the position of being subjected to threats to their freedoms by their autocratic governments. Without a well educated and informed population these governments might use the new coronavirus pandemic to promote their power abandoning democratic norms and the rule of law on behalf of drastic restraints that might remain permanent.

Although it is required to stay sensitive to governments need of taking extraordinary measures to fight with SARS-COV-2 virus, we cannot forgo our responsibilities of ensuring that our governmental leaders act in the public interest and not in their political interests. This seems to be the only option that we have to protect our liberties after this pandemic.

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