

Black, White and Shades of Grey: COVID-19 on Global

Democracy

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Abstract

The outbreak of COVID-19 has presented both risks and opportunities for international democracy. The necessity of imposing social restrictions in order to control the virus has provided convenient excuses for governments to reduce their people's freedoms, while the relative success of China's government in controlling it strengthens arguments in favor of its non-democratic system of government. However, the successes of New Zealand and South Korea, together with the experience of other countries demonstrate that autocracy has no monopoly on effective virus management and suggest that types of government are but one of several factors that determine whether a country will be successful in repressing the virus.

Keywords

COVID-19, Democracy, Government

Introduction

Originating in the wet markets of Wuhan, the coronavirus COVID-19 has spread to every corner of the globe. Since late December 2019, COVID-19 has proliferated at a dangerously rapid rate due to its human-to-human transmission as well as its 14-day incubation asymptomatic period. The chaos inflicted by this virus has dismantled healthcare systems, illuminated a plethora of inequalities in various societies, strained economies, and left a trail of ruined livelihoods.

This pandemic and its devastating effects have presented multiple challenges to governments all around the world. The various governments responsible for handling the outbreak have adopted a variety of strategies, with varying results. Repressive regimes have exploited the pandemic to serve their own political interests and justify the silencing of further opposition. Similarly, some "First World" countries have implemented policies and laws that call into question or even contradict the fundamental values of democracy and human rights. The current global political climate, which as reported by the Freedom House in 2020, has seen a 14-year consecutive decline in democracy, the actions taken by

some democracies have weakened the strength of this system of government born centuries ago in Greece possessing promise of equality and freedom.

Democracy is often defined as “a form of governance based on some degree of popular sovereignty and collective decision-making” (Landman,2007). However, amid this epidemic, the actions adopted by some of the most prominent democratic countries have failed to live up to the values they purport they espouse. There is thus much to be taken and analyzed from the response of various countries that have their own interpretation of successful governance within the upheaval of this pandemic. Accordingly, COVID-19 presents both threats and opportunities for democracy, both of which have emerged, and its long-term impact upon democracy remains yet to be determined. In the wake of the epidemic, governments have dealt with the pandemic with different philosophies and methods to varying degrees of success, some have worked to destabilize their country’s fragile democracies by strengthening censorship and state power, some have continued a pattern of suppression of dissent, others have grossly mishandled the reaction by abiding controversial theories, and an exemplary few have demonstrated leadership There is thus much to be taken and analyzed from the response of various countries that have their own interpretation of successful governance within the upheaval of this pandemic. Analysing these different reactions can lead to further exposure of broken or flawed systems and allow for a further understanding of the possible long term effects and lessons of this deadly pandemic.

Discussion

Dwindling Democracies

“Now as then, we find ourselves pondering the role of the state – as both the guardian of basic rights and as the behemoth against which one’s rights need to be defended..” - Michelin Ishay

COVID-19 has weakened personal freedoms in democracies by providing an opportunity for governments to expand their powers. Currently, the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 worldwide has reached approximately 28 million, while the number of deaths attributed to it has reached 911,000 (WHO,2020). It is impossible to deny either the danger of the virus or the tragedy and loss that it brings to a nation. Desperate times call for desperate measures. Strict, efficient, and effective actions will have to be swiftly taken to contain the public health emergency, as quickly and consistently as possible. However, as the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law has highlighted, the threat of the coronavirus should be

responded to with transparent and proportional measures. Policies should be no more restrictive than necessary, and their appropriateness and necessity should be consistently reviewed.

States require resources and power to enable them to implement protective policies such as mass quarantine, the closing of borders, and the tracking of those who have been infected. Yet in recent months certain governments have taken extreme measures in the name of public safety that could reasonably suggest ulterior motives. New or additional powers demanded by governments or rulers in already imperiled democracies are often granted with scant oversight against abuse. One of the tactics to use this pandemic to consolidate power has been dismissing checks and balances. For instance, in Hungary on March 30, the parliament granted Prime Minister Victor Orban the right to rule by decree indefinitely. By June 18, the Hungarian government had lifted this special authorization act. However, even after the revocation of the grant of emergency powers, the powers of the Hungarian executive were significantly larger than before the outbreak. For example, under the rules currently in force, with the recommendation of the Hungarian Chief Medical Officer, the Hungarian prime minister is empowered to declare a state of public health emergency enabling a subsequent period of rule by decree. In particular, this new public health emergency legislation is not time-bound and has been written so vaguely that under certain circumstances in which the public health emergency has been declared - the government could extend this power without a vote.

Whatever the initial intentions behind this law, it could provide fertile ground for further abuses of power. Orban has in fact already used the new ability to pass unrelated measures. The day following the implementation of the special authorization law, an omnibus bill was also passed. This bill would make it impossible for transgender people to legally change their gender on official documents. In addition, the special authorization law enabled the government to target and incarcerate journalists who have published what they deem “fake news,” and with Orban’s track record of transforming Hungary’s public media into government propaganda, it is probable that he will use this power to further dampen any dissent against the government’s handling of the pandemic (Lehotai,2020). This trend of tightening freedom of speech under the guise of eliminating “fake news” has become increasingly common in other countries as well. In Thailand citizens or journalists who have criticized the government handling of the pandemic have faced lawsuits and intimidation. A *Guardian* reporter was recently driven out of Egypt after questioning the data published by the

government (Brown). Fake news and misinformation have easily spread in this new age of social media. Protecting freedom of speech at a time where it is essential in enabling citizens to hold governments accountable should be of paramount importance. Instead of removing every fabricated story and punishing its author(s), government officials should take responsibility for serving the public with consistent, accurate, and concise information or updates. Many of the aforementioned countries have, according to state numbers, flattened the curve. Despite this, the repercussions of this victory and the consequences it has on democracy are concerning. At a time when democracies have continued to decline, the unpredictable variable of this pandemic has only exacerbated the problem and accelerated the backsliding of many vulnerable democracies further into autocracy.

Strengthened authoritarian regimes

‘Both during the Enlightenment and today, this dual allegiance to one’s state and to universal human rights has contributed to the perpetuation of a double standard of moral behavior, in which various appeals to human rights obligations remain subordinated to the ‘the national interest’- Michelin Ishay

The outbreak of COVID-19 has had a contradictory impact on authoritarian countries. While the effectiveness of some authoritarian states in controlling the virus has won plaudits, the typical lack of transparency in such states has also harmed their efforts and decreased trust in them.

As the origin country of COVID-19, China was the first to be catastrophically hit by COVID-19. Though the official numbers from the government are questionable, the the coronavirus's new case numbers reached a peak of 14,018 on February 12 (worldometer,2020). When the severity of this new pandemic had been realized, the Chinese government adopted a series of aggressive and sweeping actions. First by cutting off and quarantining the then epicenter, Wuhan. Located in Hubei province, Wuhan is a city of 11 million people and for 77 days after January 23, all activities in the bustling city were halted. Citizens were barred from leaving not only the city but also their residential communities. The lockdown seems to have worked. The Chinese government reported no new deaths for the first time and no locally transmitted cases on April 6 (Li). After drastic measures such as the lockdown of Wuhan, mass testing, closure of schools, and strict social distancing, China successfully flattened the curve by March (Lee,2020). China’s speed and efficiency in combating the pandemic have earned international praise. Considering the overwhelming effects that were brought on abruptly and the staggering numbers, the fact that

China has contained the virus to this degree at a breakneck is perceived by many as admirable. The World Health Organization (WHO,2020) issued a statement that acknowledged the government's "commitment to transparency." The WHO director-general Dr. Tendros Adhanem tweeted, "China is actually setting a new standard for outbreak response." Although the speed with which China built the infrastructure, gathered resources, and implemented policies necessary to combat COVID-19 is striking, one should not revere such achievement of the Chinese state without also considering the sacrifices in freedom (particularly the lack of freedom of speech) which permitted it. If the Chinese citizens living in ground zero were able to access social media platforms without being censored, they would have told tales of trauma and grief exacerbated by the government's silencing of them. The Chinese government had already locked millions of people into their homes with little to no notice, only a paltry eight hours after the announcement in the middle of the night. Many Wuhan citizens were unable to purchase essential items or food in time. No matter what their medical situation was, they were held prisoner in their own homes in a city ravaged by disease. Hospitals were the eye of the storm, overrun by patients, and people were not able to receive immediate help, and those who had prior illnesses were turned away. For instance, a woman with leukemia died after being unable to access treatment. People had to wait for hours in a line to even catch a glimpse of a doctor, a critical and chronic lack of medical supplies, protective gear, and testing kits due to the shutdown of all public transport in and out of the city. Prior to his firing, Wuhan's communist party boss Ma Guoqiang angered the public when he falsely claimed that 98.6% of the city's citizens had been tested. "Could it be that I live in a different Wuhan?" a disbelieving user commented, and many others echoed the same sentiment. Lawyer Chen Quishi who in his latest posts questioned the safety of the makeshift wards in Wuhan being located in malls and stadiums has now disappeared. Before we rush to applaud the response of the communist party, we cannot forget the voices that have been silenced in the celebrations of triumph. Given the evident dishonesty of certain officials within the Chinese government, there is no way to confirm that the Chinese government's statistics on the coronavirus have not been fabricated.

Indeed, the Chinese government's initial response to the outbreak was a month-long cover-up that wasted time that could have been used to control and reduce the transmission. Such policies call into question not only the "commitment to transparency" for which some have praised the Chinese government but also the overall effectiveness of an authoritarian approach to virus control. In particular, despite clear evidence of human transmission after the infection of medical staff, local authorities in Wuhan hid this from the public. Medical staff who raised alarm were

silenced, including Doctor Li Wenliang whose death caused mass outrage from Chinese citizens (although the comments praising him on the internet) were quickly deleted. China is infamous for its suppression of freedom of expression, and the disappearance and censorship of critics are well-documented events. The gross mishandling from the government in the vital early month of the disease cost the lives of countless people. Their lies, omissions, and deceit in those weeks prevented what would have been a crucial period of diminishing the crisis. As one scholar had stated, “the international community should support all efforts to end this outbreak, but human rights should not be a casualty to the coronavirus crisis” (Eve,2020). Viewed in this light, Dr. Tedros Adhanom’s aforementioned tweet contradicts all the fundamental values of the organization of transparency, honesty, and accountability. It is more shameful considering that WHO refused to invite Taiwan to the annual World Health Assembly even though they have been one of the most successful countries in the COVID-19 outbreak response (Tan,2020).

Other authoritarian countries have also obtained (or claimed to have obtained) success in combatting the pandemic. Vietnam with a population of 97 million people and a long border shared with China, has not reported a single death. What could have been considered as an “overreaction” when the government took drastic action in early January, has proven a prudent choice. Vietnam immediately after its first confirmed case on January 23, adopted measures that took other countries months to enact. For instance, travel restrictions, shutting down of schools, closing the border with China, and health checks at vulnerable places. Vietnam has the added advantage of experience as well, having dealt with Sars in 2003, avian flu in 2010, and large outbreaks of measles and dengue. Recent prior experience with pandemics is a commonality found in many non-western countries. This definitely allows them to be better equipped and prepared to face coronavirus. With its exemplary actions, Vietnam is not innocent of persecuting those who criticize a system of party official spying in residential areas (Jones)

The responses of the governments of China and Vietnam may suggest that in times of crisis, policies that democratic governments might frown upon, will have to be taken. Vietnam’s exceedingly early and drastic reaction when only two deaths in Wuhan had occurred, would probably not have been able to be implemented in democratic systems. The ability of such rapid speed of action is admittedly an admirable trait of authoritarian governments, and Vietnam has certainly used this trait to its full advantage. Democratic governments are able to simultaneously learn from authoritarian countries and interpret those methods to fit the standards of human rights.

Moreover, the claim that authoritarian states are uniquely effective is called into question

by the fact that some authoritarian countries have not been as effective as China or Vietnam in restricting the spread of the virus. Particularly, Iran has shown that the system of governance does not immediately translate to a victorious response. Iran is a lesson in everything wrong in a coronavirus response. The Iranian government was already vulnerable to popular dissatisfaction, rapidly losing legitimacy after the deadliest anti-regime protest since the 1979 revolution that occurred in November 2019. Following the death of an estimated 1,500 protesters, the internet was closed for six days countrywide. Then in January of 2020, a paramilitary group supporting the regime shot down a Ukrainian passenger flight killing all of the people on board, an incident bound to stir further protests. Similar to the Chinese government, the party's tactic was disinformation and cover-up. Incredibly, when flights to China were canceled, Iran's Mahan airline continued to send flights there even to the city of Wuhan. By this time coronavirus had arrived in Iran and when hospitals were already receiving victims of the disease, Iranian officials only admitted that there was a likelihood it could have arrived and still did not publicly confirm a single case. The motive for the lasting cover-up could have been that there were two important events in February: the 41st anniversary of the revolution and parliamentary elections. Ironically on February 25, Iran's health minister tested positive for coronavirus the day after he held a press conference denying the government's deceit. By March 8% of the Iranian parliamentarians had tested positive.

Then came radical changes in the Iranian government's narrative. The government shifted from denying that the virus was even in Iran to blaming America for the pandemic and Iran's lack of resources. The government donated one million masks to China and refused American help, furthering its contradictions. Due to the acute economic strain, the government started to loosen the measures on April 11. This caused a resurgence of cases in the southwestern parts of the country which has had to reimpose the measures. Due to the Iranian government's obfuscations, we will probably never know the true statistics of coronavirus cases and deaths in Iran, but what is undeniable is the government's mishandling. This has made the future of the regime even more uncertain. (Yücesoy,2020) Lack of transparency is to be expected from authoritarian governments and is one of the reasons some of those countries missed the small window of time that is essential to the prevention of mass spreading. The problems of contradictory and confusing narratives from the government and the struggle of safely reopening the country are not unique to Iran's authoritarian government nor authoritarian governments.

“Would you but look into the history of former ages, you might plainly see that the manners of the people were always regulated by those of the leading men of a state; and that whatever change took place in the latter, the same always happened in the former.” - Marcus Cicero

The response of COVID-19 among democratic countries have been varied, some exemplary and successful, others astonishingly slow and ineffective.

While the pandemic was spreading across China, coronavirus was concurrently moving quickly throughout other countries. In a public health emergency that demands the fast and sound implementation of travel restrictions, quarantine, and social distancing, some democratic countries have fared better than others. One of the most triumphant stories is New Zealand. This island nation of 9 million was declared COVID-19 free after recording no new cases for two weeks consecutively on June 8. Jacinda Ardern has been praised for her decisive leadership throughout the pandemic. Since the virus arrived in New Zealand, the country has received 1,154 confirmed cases and 22 deaths from Covid-19. Ardern warned of the “unprecedented” threat, determined not to repeat the situation in Italy. In mid-march, all travel into New Zealand was banned. On March 21, in a press conference, Ardern addressed the nation saying "I'm speaking to all New Zealanders today to give you as much certainty and clarity as we can as we fight COVID-19," Ardern emphasized the importance of the citizens coming together to follow the restrictions and protect the community so that the country could reopen and recover as swiftly as possible. There was no attacking of any enemy or shifting of blame, there were just succinct and consistent instructions and explanations (Beaubien,2020). One should also consider the geographical nature of New Zealand, being an island nation has undoubtedly served the country well in easing the process of controlling arrivals, therefore making it easier for the nation compared to other western countries.

Around late February, South Korea’s coronavirus numbers seemed to mirror the uncontrollable steep hills of countries like Italy and America. However, Korea was able to calm the rising storm and has since flattened the curve, taking measures that seem tame compared to China and Italy. The striking increase in numbers was most commonly attributed to those who attended the mass worship at the Shincheonji Church of Jesus in Daegu. Differing from China and Italy, South Korea did not lock down entire cities. Instead, the government focused on tracking and mandatory quarantine of those infected and those they encountered (Power,2020). Another innovation that has become the object of much media attention is the hundreds of “walk-in” testing booths that have been the centerpiece of South Korea’s response. Located all

over the country, these drive-in free or affordable tests are available to anyone who experiences any suspicious symptoms of coronavirus. Conducted in only about 30 minutes the accessibility of these tests has made it much smoother for the country to detect new cases and prevent further infection. Furthermore, the universal healthcare coverage system in South Korea has greatly relieved the financial burden of those who do contract the disease. What has aided South Korea has also past encounters with viral diseases that meant the government has a system already in place as well as increased capabilities in the years of development not present in other countries. The relatively recent 2015 MERS, also known as the Middle East respiratory syndrome outbreak in South Korea which led to 186 cases and 38 deaths, has expanded the knowledge, framework, and technology South Korea required to respond to similar pandemics. South Korea has also invested in its diagnostic testing field by cooperating with the private sector and encouraging local biotech companies to develop testing kits. This combined effort instead of just relying on government agencies has enabled the nation to test 10,000 kits daily. One of the main contributors to the effectiveness of the South Korean government has been its ability to collect and use to its advantage in a system of tracing, although it has also raised concern over the invasion of privacy. Introduced in the legislation following the 2015 MERS outbreak, anyone who has been in contact with an infected person is traced and quarantined. Health authorities are allowed to request for the patients' transaction and location history through credit card companies and cell phone carriers. This information is then anonymously released in the form of "travel logs", which enable people to understand the time and place of infection. The travel logs allow the general public to be alerted to avoid places where patients have frequented. This also guides the government in targeting their resources in areas that have been intensely affected. Some have criticized this data collection method as breaching patient privacy and potentially dangerous if the database is attacked. Nevertheless "in a March 4 poll led by the Seoul National University Graduate School of Public Health, 78 percent of 1,000 respondents agreed that human rights protections should be eased to strengthen virus containment efforts" (Zastrow,2020). This raises the question of what kind of violations are necessary and should be accepted in the current circumstances, what are the boundaries, and whether this is a subjective topic. The South Korean population has been proactive about wearing masks and maintaining social distancing because of past experiences or what some believe to be a more collectivist culture. The spectacular success of the campaign against COVID-19 in South Korea is evidenced in that state's ability to hold a national election on April 15. Around 29 million people participated in the election and through careful planning, no cases have been linked to polling centers. New Zealand and South Korea, in

addition to other democratic governments, have shown that it is possible to protect fundamental rights and freedoms while enacting effective measures. Countries need straightforward, trustworthy, and firm leaders that are committed to preserving the lives of each individual citizen to their best ability. The government should be a driving force of factual information, clear instruction, and inspiration. That unity and intelligence will be reflected in the population. There will be an extreme strain on the economy, people will face unemployment wherever the coronavirus falls upon, but to revive the livelihoods of the population, one must first work single-mindedly towards decreasing the case numbers and prudently facilitating the possibly or event of reopening so that when it does happen, the population can recover without the anxiety of a resurgence of the virus.

An experimental and unusual anti-coronavirus plan emerged in Sweden. Aiming to acquire “herd immunity”, the government did not enforce any broad stay at home order. Aside from the closing of universities and high schools all other precautions like wearing masks or social distancing were wholly voluntary. This relaxed approach was chosen to minimize economic instability. The government reasoned that this strategy would be less economically damaging than strict measures and would not result in great amounts of death. Neither of these predictions was correct. Sweden has had one of the highest death rates per capita from COVID-19, with more than half of them occurring in long-term care homes. The supposed economic support was not evident either. According to the European Commission, Sweden’s GDP is expected to shrink around 6%, similar to its Scandinavian neighbors who have implemented stricter measures. (Haseltine,2020)

The United States’ lack of preparation and leadership in the handling of the coronavirus has been obvious. America currently has more coronavirus cases and deaths than any other country in the world. The country falls short in the number of daily tests needed to be able to end social distancing. Harvard researchers estimate that 1-10 million tests are needed when only 500,000 are conducted daily. The Trump administration’s refusal to construct a competent federal track and trace program, leaving it up to states, has left only eight states with sufficient tracers to control the epidemic. By allowing the states to make their own choices on reopening, President Trump has caused a constant cacophony of different opinions and policies from different states that have harmed the preservation of social distancing and wearing masks. President Trump has adopted a variety of unhelpful stances and provided inaccurate information ranging from falsely promoting hydroxychloroquine as a cure for COVID-19 to, encouraging his

supporters to defy stay at home orders and refusing to wear masks himself (Wenham and Yamey,2020). With videos of people throwing tantrums about wearing masks to entire anti-mask rallies, it is clear that the formerPresident’s misguided opinions have been adopted in certain communities. The White House has a noticeable absence of concrete strategies, consistent narrative, and firm leadership committed to tackling the public health emergency that has doomed its coronavirus response.

Conclusion

According to the above examination conducted, governments can be divided into three broad, generalized categories: transitional, authoritarian, and democratic. Through empirical and anecdotal evidence, this paper has addressed the performance of countries in each of these categories regarding the coronavirus. In “transitional” countries COVID-19 appears to have the effect of weakening democratic norms by allowing ruling parties to pass laws giving the ruling party or person unchecked power. COVID-19 thus clearly has the potential to cause irrevocable damage to the future of democracy and human rights. Coronavirus will send shockwaves beyond public health, reaching further into the political system. Conversely, the authoritarian regimes have been praised for their efficient response and condemned for the violation of their human rights, especially the freedom of speech. This suppression of free speech has delayed the reaction of countries such as Iran and China, leading to huge spikes in numbers that could have been prevented. Democratic governments, on the other hand, have experienced contrasting levels of success. Some like South Korea and New Zealand have triumphed, while America and Sweden continue to lag far behind. This variance could be attributed to the variety of approaches taken by democratic governments. For example, Sweden ignored the recommendations of WHO and opted for an unconventional approach in order to preserve the economy. In this uphill battle against COVID-19, every country will have to strike the balance between protecting human rights and protecting health, while facing the dilemma of the economy or public health. The most successful nations and those that should be imitated are the democratic governments that have currently succeeded such as Taiwan, South Korea, and New Zealand. However, the challenge ahead of reviving the economy and transitioning society is an ongoing one. There are still many limitations to this paper and the conclusions drawn from it. Firstly, as of writing, the coronavirus is far from over and cured. The future is arguably more unclear than ever, as multiple countries begin to end their stay-at-home orders and economically

start to recover, there is still a substantial chance for additional waves of COVID-19. Only after the pandemic has ended can we truly have a clear panoramic view and pass judgment on the actions and events that have taken place. Secondly, as addressed briefly, certain countries have been accused and suspected of undercounting their case numbers, so the authenticity of certain data points could be skewed. Finally, there is a multitude of factors and layers to each government decision and each country that could not be covered. The acute economic crisis and increase in unemployment that most countries face have definitely influenced the decisions. Existing inequality within the healthcare system has been highlighted now even more prominently. This could be either because the country lacks universal healthcare or because people of certain races are disproportionately affected. The coronavirus pandemic is a complex and fascinating subject that could spurn an infinite number of research papers. How each corner of the world, each industry, and each community has uniquely dealt with this epidemic is a question likely to be debated for a long time to come

Limitations

This research paper was written during the summer of 2020 and is limited by the time in which it was composed. The coronavirus pandemic and corresponding response is ever evolving and multifaceted and this paper is therefore limited in its scope as it would be impossible to examine all the ways in which COVID-19 had affected society.

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