

Avoiding Authoritarian Pitfalls During the Coronavirus Pandemic

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The coronavirus pandemic is putting immense pressure on the world's health systems, pushing many of them to the brink. The images of exhausted healthcare workers, jammed hospital hallways, and makeshift medical equipment make clear the severity of the crisis. Less visible but equally troubling is the strain that the virus is placing on democracies around the globe. Freedom of movement and assembly have been curtailed in lockdowns. Governments are using electronic tracking and health-data collection to spot and follow infected citizens—sometimes with full transparency and sometimes with none at all. Freedom of the press is also taking a dent.

In the face of this global crisis, it is hard to monitor and react to such changes in real time, but vigilance is needed. Governance changes undertaken in the heat of the moment can quickly become permanent. To be sure, fighting this pandemic requires exceptional steps, but it should not lead to permanent damage to democratic values and institutions.

Protecting democratic values and institutions must start at home. Democratic leaders should draw lessons from other moments when extreme measures were taken in the name of enhancing security. For example, after the September 11 attacks, in some cases, the pendulum swung too far and led to illegal and immoral practices, such as waterboarding and extraordinary rendition, that violated fundamental human rights. Those policies were eventually reversed, but the public came to accept a much higher degree of government control, such as the tracking of people's air-travel patterns or wider surveillance measures.

Authoritarian Opportunism

In the current crisis, there are already signs that government overreach is underway. In Lebanon, the coronavirus has been used to justify breaking up a long-standing anti-government protest camp. In Cambodia, opposition members have been arrested nominally due to posting fake news about the pandemic. In Hungary, Prime Minister Victor Orbán, who had already for years hollowed out the country's democracy, pushed through parliament draconian laws and transfers of powers to the government with no sunset clauses. Hungary may have been the first democratic casualty of the current crisis. Democratic leaders around the world need to be on the look out for such slides into illiberalism and authoritarianism and speak out on behalf of democratic rights in other countries.

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Ideally, the United States, a longstanding advocate of democracy and democratic values, would lead such efforts. But President Donald Trump has largely abdicated that traditional leadership role and shown little interest in defending human rights, the rule of law, and freedom of the press. Nevertheless, throughout the crisis, the World Health Organization's blind trust in China and its shunning of Taiwan shows the need for a reform of the global health system that is led by democracies dedicated to transparency.

Seizing on this leadership vacuum, authoritarian China is working to fill the void and portray itself as the new global leader in the crisis. It has ramped up its mask and assistance diplomacy across Europe, pairing its donations with a narrative about its superior national response. But democratic nations in Europe should not fall for this spin. Yes, China can construct a new hospital in a flash, and yes, China's assistance deserves praise. But before anyone become too starry-eyed, they should remember that the Chinese Communist Party willingly obfuscated the truth. On January 14, the World Health Organization sent out a message that there was no evidence of human-to-human coronavirus transmission based on official Chinese information. It was more important to the Communist regime to keep up appearances at a local party event in January in Wuhan than inform the world of the calamity we would all soon be facing. The courageous Chinese doctors who early on told the truth suffered repression. China's initial botched response slowed the global response. Free media and freedom of expression in China obviously would have made a significant difference.

China's crisis response entailed a massive infringement of citizens' right. It resembled a test run of its frightening social credit system. Without consent and transparency, the authorities color-code residents in red, yellow, green. They also suppress information. Fang Bin and Chen Qiushi, two citizen journalists, disappeared without a trace in January-February while covering the outbreak in Wuhan. The EU and the United States should remember their names and include them in upcoming human-rights dialogues with China.

Democratic Advantage

Democracy has longer-term resilience because of its engaged citizens. In Italy, initially the hardest-hit country in Europe, citizens in isolation are voluntarily cheering and applauding their health workers each evening from their balconies. In Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel followed the self-confinement rules after she came in contact with an infected person. Prior to that, she went on a moderate grocery shopping as a good citizen role-model. A German civic-tech hackathon has produced thousands of suggestions for helping out in the crisis. In the Czech Republic and elsewhere in Europe, media freedom assures that critical questions can be raised, including on Chinese-made testing equipment that arrived in faulty condition. And by now, assistance among EU member states dwarfs China's. There is no naivety about China's aid, either. The EU's high representative for foreign affair, Josip Borell, has pointed to how China spun 'the politics of generosity'. If democracies need inspiration from Asia, they should rather look to the democratic South Korea and Taiwan, which used electronic tracking with people's consent and relied on an engaged citizenry.

Democracy is messy, including in times of crisis. But rights, accountability, and public consent matter. Let us not be fooled by the Chinese authoritarian smokescreen that democracies can't handle corona. As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, democratic societies could allow more tracking of citizens' health data and move-

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ment, but it should be based on informed consent and dialogue within society. We should check our temperature, but equally check the well-being of our civil liberties. They are ours to keep.

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