



GLOBAL PANDEMIC: CORONAVIRUS AND GLOBAL DISORDER

Authoritarian Weaknesses and the Pandemic

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As the coronavirus has spread, many political observers [have warned](#) that it is bolstering authoritarianism globally. The pandemic has provided a trigger or opportunity for numerous nondemocratic or illiberal governments to impose new restrictions on civil liberties, persecute opponents, limit protests, delay elections, and introduce new mass surveillance techniques. A devastating biological virus has translated into a damaging political virus that has markedly eroded the overall state of freedom in the world in just six months.

Yet this discouraging near-term political picture becomes less ominous, or at least less clear-cut, if one looks down the road. Many authoritarian and authoritarian-leaning governments have not responded well to the pandemic. The governments of Algeria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Burundi, Eritrea, Equatorial Guinea, Iran, Nicaragua, Russia, Tajikistan, Tanzania, Turkey, Turkmenistan, and Zimbabwe, for example, have displayed serious shortcomings in confronting the coronavirus, shortcomings that often reflect core features of their authoritarian governance. These problems range from refusals to recognize the severity of the problem to

the suppression of valuable domestic voices or sources of information, disorganized policy responses, and unwillingness to maintain the lockdown measures that would safeguard their populations. These failings are likely to have negative long-term consequences for these regimes. Angry, aggrieved citizens are not a solid foundation for regime durability.

Of course, some authoritarian or authoritarian-leaning governments have mounted relatively effective responses to the virus: in this respect, countries like Bahrain, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates, and Vietnam come to mind. Those that have done well may gain enhanced domestic popularity and credibility for their competence, thus reinforcing their hold on power. But they are a minority in the authoritarian camp, and regimes with relatively successful pandemic responses are not guaranteed to reap political benefits from their actions. In Singapore's elections in early July, the main opposition party won more seats than any opposition force has in decades, at least [partly](#) due to citizens' discontent over the government's pandemic response. After initial success in containing the virus,



Singapore was struck by subsequent outbreaks among its population of **migrant workers**. Moreover, most authoritarians—whatever the quality of their pandemic policies—face enormous new economic pressures as a result of the virus. Slowed or negative growth, straitened budgets, devastated middle classes, and swelling ranks of poverty-stricken citizens will create political pressure on governments around the world—authoritarian and democratic alike.

KEY WEAKNESSES PLAGUING AUTHORITARIANS

To probe the potential political consequences of the pandemic for authoritarian regimes, it is useful to look more closely at why many have fallen short in their responses to the coronavirus. Four key weaknesses are manifest. First and foremost is a penchant for feeble rather than decisive leadership. Authoritarian leaders revel in projecting an image of strength. Some have, in fact, exhibited valuable decisiveness and clarity when confronted with the coronavirus. Vietnam's leaders, for example, responded to the country's first confirmed infections as early as January, imposing travel restrictions and quarantines with a speed that made it a **textbook case** of an effective response to the public health emergency. Yet many other authoritarian or authoritarian-leaning leaders have shown startling weakness in facing the pandemic, falling back on deeply ingrained habits of lying to deny inconvenient facts, spin conspiracy theories, and create alternative realities. In late March, as case rates and fatalities soared across Europe, President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus **dismissed** a reporter's concerns about the spread of the virus in his own country: "There are no viruses here. Do you see any of them flying around? I don't see them either." In Tanzania, which **has not published** nationwide figures relating to the coronavirus since May 8, President John Magufuli **insisted** that the country had defeated the virus through prayer. The president of Burundi **assured** his citizens that divine protection would suffice against the virus, while Venezuela's president trafficked

in farfetched conspiracy theories and **promoted** on social media the use of herbal concoctions to treat the virus. The leaders of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan both **responded** to the arrival of the virus by outright denying its presence in their countries.

In lieu of claiming that the coronavirus was invisible and therefore not present, quite a few authoritarian leaders have made themselves invisible instead. Cameroon's President Paul Biya **vanished** in March for over two months, while in Nicaragua, President Daniel Ortega has ducked from public view for extended periods **twice**, including once for more than a month. In Eritrea, President Isaias Afwerki **did not speak** to the country from mid-February through mid-April. Even Russian President Vladimir Putin, the prototypical authoritarian strongman, **displayed** striking avoidance behavior—or perhaps apathy—by moving to his countryside residence outside Moscow after the virus arrived in Russia, leaving his subordinates to convey negative news to the public.

A second weakness of many authoritarian regimes in confronting the coronavirus is their suspicion or outright hostility toward independent voices and civil society. In recent months, countries such as Algeria, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Russia, Thailand, and Uzbekistan have passed so-called fake news laws related to the pandemic that criminalize criticisms of their governments' responses to the public health emergency or even reporting of pandemic conditions that does not match the governments' preferred narratives. These crackdowns impede effective public health responses, given that civil society can be a crucial partner to governments—especially for authoritarians with weak state capacity, such as those in many countries in Africa, former Soviet states, and the Middle East—in terms of collecting and distributing accurate and timely health-related information and delivering resources and care.

In late December 2019, for instance, **Chinese** authorities silenced and reprimanded Li Wenliang, a Wuhan Central Hospital doctor who warned of the initial

outbreak. By censoring Li instead of acting on his alerts, local authorities may have facilitated the coronavirus's unchecked spread; consequently, Li's death from the virus in early February **sparked** an outpouring of anger and grief on Chinese social media. Although **Chinese citizens** mobilized to respond to the pandemic by using social media to procure scarce protective gear or find open hospital beds, the Chinese Communist Party's long-standing distrust of civil society has hindered potential collaboration between government officials and volunteers. In **Egypt** and **Russia**, doctors who criticize or challenge the government's response to the pandemic risk detention or **physical retaliation**.

A third debility of the pandemic responses of many authoritarian regimes has been the lack of coherence and flexibility in the hierarchy of governance. Effective national public health responses to the pandemic require not just clear, consistent mandates from the top, but integrated approaches in which regional and local authorities can take initiative, adapt responses to local conditions, and report critical information up the line. Yet many authoritarians instead **misuse** subnational governance as a “flak jacket”—a shield for deflecting responsibility and criticism more than for solving governance challenges.

In Russia, for example, Putin devolved pandemic decisionmaking to regional officials more accustomed to executing his orders than responding to local citizens' concerns. With a lack of guidance from the top, disorder among the governors ensued, as some officials adopted measures the Kremlin criticized as excessive and others took measures that were deemed insufficient. Infighting among elites also has emerged: when the mayor of Moscow took initiative in response to the virus and ordered people to stay home, users on **Telegram**—an app that permits citizens to share information and anonymously criticize each other—lambasted him. In Turkey, where mayors in Istanbul and Ankara affiliated with the opposition party have won praise among their constituents for their responses to the pandemic, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has actively tried to

undermine them whenever possible—announcing weekend curfews on short notice to leave the opposition mayors flat-footed, canceling charity fundraisers that the mayors organized, and shutting down opposition-run food kitchens—even at the cost of weakening the country's broader response to the pandemic.

Finally, issues with political legitimacy have also hurt some authoritarians' pandemic policies. The devastating economic effects of lockdown measures have pressured all governments to find a workable balance between public health concerns and citizens' economic needs. But this challenge is especially difficult for governments that do not enjoy the legitimacy that comes from winning free and fair elections and that instead rely heavily on economic performance as their primary source of popular legitimacy. Some in this boat have reacted by prematurely lifting initially tough lockdown measures. In **Turkey**, last month's lifting of many restrictions saw a spike in cases, but Erdoğan refrained from reimposing another lockdown, fearful of the economic damage it would cause. Alternatively, some regimes also must grapple with the demands of influential societal sectors, even at the expense of delaying the government's response to the pandemic. In Iran, in late February as the coronavirus began spreading through the country, Shia clerics vociferously **resisted** government demands that major shrines be closed—an encapsulation of the power of the country's religious establishment.

Of course, some democracies have struggled with some or all of these challenges in their pandemic responses. Some democratic leaders have displayed weakness and avoidance, tried to suppress contrary voices, failed to work effectively with local authorities, and refrained from implementing much-needed public health measures out of concern about their economic impact. But on the whole, these tendencies have been much less marked among democracies compared to autocracies. Moreover, among democracies, those with leaders who have strong illiberal tendencies, like U.S. President Donald Trump and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, have done the worst in responding to the pandemic.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF AUTHORITARIANISM

The mixed record of authoritarians' responses to the coronavirus undercuts any simple conclusion that the pandemic will bolster authoritarianism globally over the long term. Try as they will to distort reality and spin fables, the many nondemocratic leaders and regimes that have stumbled in tackling the pandemic now face citizens with powerful new grounds for grievance and distrust. It is hard to blind citizens slammed by a national public health emergency to the realities of weak leadership at the top and incoherent governance at local levels. On top of these governance factors, the economic devastation that most authoritarian countries are facing will further add to citizens' anger and restlessness and reduce the financial tools besieged leaders often use to buy off key discontented sectors.

Citizens' surging discontent toward many authoritarian countries may not necessarily translate into immediate political instability or change. But it is likely to contribute to the significant authoritarian shakiness that has made itself felt over the past decade. Behind the popular but simplistic notion that authoritarianism is rising globally lies the fact that the global wave of [antigovernment protests](#) over the past ten years—an historic high in protests around the world—[has hit](#) many nondemocratic regimes hard. Numerous nondemocracies, from Russia and Iran to Venezuela and Togo, have been rocked by significant protests. In some—including Algeria, Armenia, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, and Sudan—protests have driven leaders out of power. Despite the cutting-edge manipulative tactics and tricks of many authoritarian regimes, they are not immune from what is perhaps the central political imperative of this century: the steadily rising demands of citizens almost everywhere for capable, effective governance.

As the biggest governance test in recent memory—one that many authoritarians are failing—the pandemic and its ensuing economic devastation will turbocharge this underlying driver of global political change. Thus, despite the spike in repressive measures that the coronavirus has produced so far, the medium- to long-term prospects for many authoritarian governments are less certain today than they were before the pandemic hit.

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