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COVID-19 and the crisis of democracy

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COVID-19 and the crisis of democracy

In late December 2019, the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) appeared in the Chinese city of Wuhan. In early 2020, the virus had reached dozens of countries, and by April 2020, the virus had infected around three million and killed more than 200 thousand¹. In late January, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a state of emergency² and shortly after the virus was declared a pandemic³. Countries closed their borders and airports and global aviation ground to a halt and governments imposed either curfew or total lockdown in addition to other procedures that were characterized by centralization and conservatism. The spread of coronavirus has not only shaken the entire global order but also put into question the concept of alliances and unions especially as far as cooperation to counter the crisis is concerned⁴.

Centralization as the way out of the crisis:

Coronavirus spread fast in China with 82,830 infected and 4,633 dead⁵, yet by the end of March 2020 China's ability to contain the virus was deemed impressive⁶. China isolated around 60 million people and imposed firm travel restrictions, which resulted in containing the virus as the WHO announced. In order to face the crisis, China adopted extremely stringent measures⁷ and cooperated with the WHO on both domestic and international levels, which demonstrated its capacity to reverse the crisis⁸.

In addition to China, Japan and South Korea also managed to curb the spread of the virus especially in the light of their experience in dealing with SARS in 2002-2003. Western governments, on the others, failed in containing the virus. For example, US President Donald Trump downplayed for months the dangers of the virus and made fun of calls to take serious measures before it spreads while advising citizens to only wash their hands to protect themselves even after the virus reached the White House and several American and foreign officials who met Trump were infected. UK

¹ "COVID-19 CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC." *Worldometers*. April 27, 2020: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>

² "Coronavirus: WHO declares global emergency [Arabic]." *UN News*, January 30, 2020: <https://cutt.ly/3ytEWVI>

³ "What does declaring Coronavirus a pandemic mean? [Arabic]" *Sky News Arabia*, March 12, 2020: <https://cutt.ly/tytQAYi>

⁴ Walid Abdallah. "One world ending and another starting: The world and China after Coronavirus [Arabic]." *Arabic People Online*. April 5, 2020: <https://cutt.ly/GyoTLpv>

⁵ "COVID-19 CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC." Op. cit.

⁶ "Corona: How can the world learn about containing the pandemic from China? [Arabic]" *UN News*, March 14, 2020: <https://cutt.ly/0yoPnU6>

⁷ Bandar al-Doushi. "China's way of containing Corona and its side effects [Arabic]." *AlArabiya.net*, March 8, 2020: <https://cutt.ly/TyoATjX>

⁸ "Corona: How can the world learn about containing the pandemic from China? [Arabic]" Op. cit.

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Prime Minister Boris Johnson argued in favor of herd immunity and asked British citizens to get ready for bidding their loved ones farewell even though he retracted later on⁹.

The way China dealt with the situation was seen as proof of the efficiency of centralized and closed systems, especially with the virus spreading in democratic countries such as France and Italy and



countries based on a decentralized system such as the United States and Britain. Authoritarian regimes were arguably more capable of taking faster and stricter measures and managed to channel all their resources in one direction without being faced with opposition or complications. Such argument constitutes an extension of an

ongoing tendency at undermining democracy and which started in the past few years as people started opposing conventional democratic institutions and supporting a more authoritarian approach¹⁰.

Chinese propaganda led many to see that the current crisis requires strict and centralized intervention in which measures can be imposed on everyone. Lack of solidarity among members of the European Union contributed to supporting the argument in favor of state centralization as opposed to regional alliance. Freedom of movement across European borders was also held accountable for spreading the virus.

Coronavirus between authoritarianism and democracy:

Many analysts argue that China's success in fighting the virus does not necessarily mean that democracy is defective. Democracy, in its conventional sense, is equipped to face crises and global developments. The continuation of democracy in its current form is, however, contingent upon maintaining the system created by the United States and Western Europe following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The problem with this system, especially with US hegemony, is that it is not sustainable in light of political and economic developments across the

⁹ Shady Louis. "Corona and China: Which is the threat to democracy? [Arabic]" *Qantara*, March 26, 2020: <https://cutt.ly/8ypoGyP>

¹⁰ Beshoy Ramzi. "Corona's revolution against democracy [Arabic]." *Al-Youm al-Sabea*, March 25, 2020: <https://cutt.ly/Hypo2uD>

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world and the emergence of new powers that challenge American influence such as Russia and China¹¹.

In fact, the question that needs to be posed here is whether authoritarianism is in itself one of the reasons for the spread of the virus. This is demonstrated in the timing the Chinese authorities chose to make news about the virus public. A report published by *Le Monde* traced the development and spread of the virus and noted that Chinese authorities kept news of the virus secret, which led to¹² its spread across the world. A Chinese doctor reported in March 2019 that viruses similar to SARS would appear in the future and in mid-December 2019 Chinese doctors reported that a virus was being transmitted through touching. However, the Chinese government did not alert the WHO and local authorities in Wuhan warned of spreading news of the virus and threatened penalizing those who violate this decree¹³.

This secrecy was particularly underlined when it was not possible to identify patient zero in Wuhan. While this patient was officially identified as M. Chen, who allegedly contracted the virus on December 8, 2019 and recovered, the English-speaking South China Morning Post reported that the patient is a 55-year-old man who contracted the virus on November 17, 2019 and that one to five people contracted the virus daily, the latter fact confirmed by official numbers¹⁴. China tightened its grip on citizens even more after the virus started spreading, which was demonstrated in increasing censorship, spying on people, and arresting those who made news about the virus public. The first doctor to warn of the threats posed by the virus, who later died after contracting the virus, was arrested for spreading false news¹⁵. This increased the mystery surrounding the virus even more and put into question figures and facts released by the Chinese government.

Another question is what if the virus had started in a democracy in which accountability, transparency, and freedom of information are observed. Taiwan, for example, dealt with the crisis efficiently as the number of people who contracted the virus did not exceed 429 on April 25 with six dead and 275 recovered¹⁶. Taiwan managed to act preemptively not only due to its strong

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Frédéric Lemaître. "Il ne faut pas diffuser cette information au public: l'échec du système de détection chinois face au coronavirus." *Le Monde*, April 6, 2020: <https://cutt.ly/VypsnfK>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Amin Zarwati. "Did China hide information that could've saved the world from Corona? [Arabic]" *France 24 Arabic*, April 7, 2020: <https://cutt.ly/TypTYoJ>

¹⁵ Ismail Azzam. "China or Taiwan? Which is a model for Corona containment? [Arabic]" *DW*, March 26, 2020: <https://cutt.ly/eypYdGm>

¹⁶ "Coronavirus statistics around the world [Arabic]." *Nabd*, April 25, 2020: <https://nabd.com/corona>

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healthcare system, but also because it is one of the major democracies in East Asia. When the virus started spreading in China, Taiwan sent a medical team to examine the situation and was already prepared on the domestic level with the health center it had established earlier to deal with epidemics following the SARS outbreak in 2002-2003. The Taiwanese government also used technology to inform citizens of ways to dealing with the crisis and established a communication channel for citizens' inquiries, created a database through which citizens can inform the government of their travels, and created a thorough system to keep track of the cases¹⁷. When the virus started spreading in China, the Taiwanese government contacted the WHO to obtain the necessary information, examined all travelers from China, and implemented 127 measures to preempt the spread of the virus. In fact, Taiwan declared a state of emergency before Wuhan¹⁸.

The comparison between China and Taiwan illustrated that there is not direct link between authoritarian regimes and fighting the spread of the virus or between implementing authoritarian measures and actually curbing the spread of the virus.

The Italian government, for example, placed the entire country under total lockdown, closed all stores except grocery shops and pharmacies, schools, and universities, and banned gatherings. However, those authoritarian measures did not stop the spread of the virus as for a whole month Italy remained the world's



first country in terms of the dead and the infected and now ranks third after the United States and Spain. South Korea ranked third after China and Italy then became the 30th without closing its borders or imposing a complete lockdown. The Korean government examined hundreds of thousands of citizens and tracked potential carriers of the virus through cellphones and satellite technology, which proved that stopping the spread of the virus is not related to implementing authoritarian measures¹⁹. This shows that authoritarian regimes did not prove more capable of dealing with the crisis since both South Korea and Taiwan, which are democracies, handled the situation better than an authoritarian country like China²⁰. Under the current circumstances,

¹⁷ Ismail Azzam. Op. cit.

¹⁸ "A country neighboring China that contained Corona fast [Arabic]." *Sky News Arabia*, April 5, 2020: <https://cutt.ly/aypY1Ej>

¹⁹ Pablo Ochoa. "How democracies learn from authoritarian China in fighting Coronavirus [Arabic]." *BBC Arabic*, March 13, 2020: <https://cutt.ly/RypUOF6>

²⁰ John Allen and others. "How the World Will Look after the Coronavirus Pandemic: The pandemic will change the world forever. We asked 12 leading global thinkers for their predictions." *Foreign Policy*, March 20, 2020: <https://cutt.ly/1yajrvr>

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response to the spread of Coronavirus cannot be evaluated domestically within each country, but rather internationally in comparison with other countries. In this case, it becomes obvious that democracies handled the crisis better. It is also important when making this evaluation to note that while political systems differ from one country to another and while some countries are witnessing a remarkable rise in the right wing, others have powerful left-leaning parties or are more of welfare states, there is one global system the currently dominates the world: capitalism. This system takes different shapes, but it is at the end supported by international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and operates based on a certain division of roles. For example, researcher Amr Abdel Rahman²¹ wrote in a Facebook post that “the United States plays the role of the investor while China plays the role of the manufacturer.” This is the case with many countries acting as sources of raw material and others as markets for manufactured products. The crisis has, in fact, proven that capitalism is more intact than it seems and that no matter how many shapes it takes, it is still the only dominant system²².

This fact underlines a major crisis through which representational democracies linked to the capitalist system are going through. The capitalist system was initially meant to prioritize public welfare and make sure the demands of all segments of society are met in an atmosphere of free competition, yet ended up creating monopoly entities that allowed a minority to be in full control of the public sphere while the majority suffers from deprivation on both political and economic levels. Liberalism as a political methodology and capitalism as an economic system did not offer any guarantees for freedom. In fact, freedom became a privilege that only a minority of politicians and capitalists enjoy to serve their interests. The control exercised by executive powers and inefficient administration in both the public and private sectors drove many analysts to question the effectiveness of conventional political representation that reduces democracy to seasonal elections and does not guarantee proper monitoring of government performance. This sentiment was intensified by the fact that between one election and another, serious decisions are made by governments without going back to the people, which led to growing lack of trust in both the system and politicians who represent it²³. Disillusionment in the conventional democratic system

²¹ Amr Abdel Rahman is an Egyptian researcher whose interests focus on human rights, judicial reforms, and democratic transition in the Arab world. He is currently working on his PhD thesis at the University of Essex on developments of the Egyptian rights discourse in the past decade.

²² For more info on global division of labor under the capitalist system, please see Chris Harman’s *Zombie Capitalism: Global Crisis and the Relevance of Marx*. Haymarket Book, 2009.

²³ Mohamed El Agati and others. “From representational to participatory democracy: Models and recommendations [Arabic].” Arab Forum for Alternatives and Arab Reform Initiative, 2012, p.5: <https://cutt.ly/ZypJhj7>

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led many to look for alternatives that would succeed at what political elites failed. That is why it was easy to support figures who do not originally belong to the political elite and who promise to right the wrongs of traditional democracy, hence the remarkable rise of the right-wing in the past five years. The crisis of conventional democracy was, therefore, addressed through another form of governance that constitutes a threat to the very core of democratic values.

This political development was manifested in the response of the right-wing to the crisis caused by the spread of the virus. Several protests erupted in the United States against restrictions to contain the spread of the virus, especially after President Trump underestimated the threat and argued against lockdown. Those protests that called for a return to normalcy obstructed in many cases work progress in hospitals. This was particularly demonstrated in Republican protests in Michigan. Protestors also used for mobilization a website owned by Republican businessman and Senate candidate Diego Rodriguez. Many supporters of far-right movements in the US called for protesting against lockdown and movement restriction in different states²⁴.



The pandemic and global order:

While the WHO is the international entity that globally deals with the pandemic, its role in doing so is mainly technical and its decisions and statements are characterized by a great deal of uncertainty owing to the organization's reluctance to get into a confrontation with any of the affected countries. The weakness of the WHO consolidated the power of international financial institutions. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is building its 2020 strategy on the decline in

²⁴ Jason Wilson. "The right wing groups behind wave of protests against Covid-19 restrictions." *The Guardian*, April 17, 2020: <https://cutt.ly/zyaKkeq>

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economic growth across the world as a result of the general state of recession and the decline in demand. The IMF strategy is based on two priorities: first, guaranteeing constant spending on healthcare whether in terms of protective measures, flattening the curve, or treating patients; second, taking measures that can alleviate the economic impact of the pandemic. According to Kristalina Georgieva²⁵, the role of the IMF and the World Bank is mainly to speed up measures that enable the International Community to face the crisis more effectively. The World Bank offered an aid package of USD 12 billion, six billion for construction and development and the other six for the private sector to fund trade and working capital. This package is supposed to offer a fast and flexible response to the crisis in a way that caters to the needs of developing countries through technical support and commodities²⁶ and of the most vulnerable states through services²⁷.

Even with the current crisis, international financial institutions still insist on imposing austerity measures on countries to which the aid goes. These measures, by definition, contradict the needs of the world to face the crisis since they are based on the assumption of more spending in the service sector in general and investment in healthcare and drug sectors in particular whether to face the current epidemic or be prepared for any similar future crises. Those measures are also linked to a set of conditions imposed on the public sector to limit its power in favor of the private sector in light of a crisis that requires the mobilization of resources in affected countries. Therefore, the policies adopted by these institutions constitute an integral part of the crisis through which the world is going at the moment despite all the slogans they use about protecting economic and social rights.

The crisis revealed that the setbacks of international institutions are not only subjective, but objective as well. Since these institutions were created, countries ask them to implement specific programs then don't give them the power to do so, hence allowing the institutions to be controlled by states. For example, the UN Security Council could not meet about Coronavirus until April 9, a whole month after declaring the virus a pandemic, because several member states either thought

²⁵ Kristalina Georgieva is the managing director of the International Monetary Fund.

²⁶ Commodities here refer to gloves, masks, and portable ventilators as well as healthcare procedures such as storing emergency room equipment, clinical care, and quarantine facilities.

²⁷ "Joint Press Conference on COVID-19 by IMF Managing Director and World Bank Group President." *World Bank*, March 4, 2020: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/speech/2020/03/04/joint-press-conference-on-covid-19-by-imf-managing-director-and-world-bank-group-president>

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that the virus is not part of the council's jurisdiction since it does not threaten international peace and security while others found the spread of the virus an opportunity to get back at China²⁸ .

With one single global system is in control and with international institutions promoting one single approach, the crisis was bound to escalate. The approach adopted by authoritarian regimes played a major role in this escalation.

Conclusion:

There is no doubt that the shape and structure of the global order will be affected by the crisis. In fact, it is in the aftermath of major crises that historic transformations take place and the balance of power changes. Many analysts argue that the coming phase will see a decline in US hegemony. Regarding impact on democracy, freedom of information, and transparency, several political analysts²⁹ argue that countries will move towards more repression after the crisis is over. According to Stephen Walt and John Ikenberry, the world in general will become less free and open, the state will emerge more powerful, and nationalist discourse will gain more ground. In the Arab region, several governments took advantage of the crisis to tighten their grip on citizens.

This is demonstrated in the new internet law passed in Morocco, the campaign launched by the Egyptian authorities against civil society, and the violent suppression protests that erupted in Lebanon in April 2020. The crisis is also expected to drive governments to focus more on domestic affairs at the expense of regional and global issues such as climate change. Several countries will suffer the impact of the crisis on the long run, which will lead to increasing the number of failed states. As far as international relations are concerned, the European Union is likely to emerge much weaker and American-Chinese relations are expected to sour even further³⁰.



²⁸ Ibrahim Awad. "What will the world look like after Corona? [Arabic]" *Al-Shorouk*, April 18, 2020: <https://cutt.ly/eyakdtq>

²⁹ John Allen and others. Op. cit.

³⁰ John Allen and others. Op. cit.

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Many analysts argue that the crisis is bound to affect the financial relationship between the state and the private sector and between countries. Debts will undoubtedly multiply, which will have an impact on growth rates. Corporates will be affected in different ways, but banks in particular played a major role in helping many companies continue and this is expected to remain the case for the coming phase. One of the most important questions is who and what would be most affected by the crisis. Unemployment and the collapse of the healthcare system are one of the most alarming repercussions of the crisis, yet not all segments of society are threatened in the same way. The danger posed by the virus is likely to lead to demands for better social networks and improved healthcare services³¹.

It is important to look at the future with a different perspective. The constant failures of the dominant global system necessitates the creation of a more humane system based on transparency, accountability, and freedom of information on both domestic and international levels. Many analysts argue that when the UN Charter was drafted in 1945, it focused on the threats related to conflicts between countries as was the case with World War Two and previous wars. It did not, however, address other threats such as epidemics or climate change. That is why the new system needs to address the current context in which the world is exposed to different types of danger³². This will only be possible under democratic regimes that represent the needs of their people as well as international institutions that prioritize the public good through laying more emphasis on healthcare in addition to development and global security. Lobbying for such a system necessitates the mobilization of public opinion through research centers, think tanks, civil society organizations, universities, trade unions, and political parties across the world³³.

³¹ Mark Carney. "The world after corona crisis." *The Economist*, April 16, 2020: <https://cutt.ly/4ya7eI1>

³² Ibrahim Awad. Op. cit.

³³ Amr Moussa. "What next? [Arabic]" *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, April 16, 2020: <https://cutt.ly/4yalUyE>