

Covid-19 and democracy

Tackling the pandemic without doing away with democracy

by **Julia Leininger**,

German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)



The Current Column

of 27 April 2020

d·i·e

Deutsches Institut für
Entwicklungspolitik



German Development
Institute



In Germany, we are currently discussing what restrictions are acceptable in an open society when it comes to protecting individuals' bodily integrity against the pandemic. The Federal Constitutional Court came down clearly on the side of democracy in overturning a protest ban. But governments around the world have restricted basic democratic rights such as freedom of assembly, stepped up state monitoring of citizens, muzzled the media with new laws and arrests, and expanded their own powers as part of their Covid-19 policy. Jörg Lau, writing in DIE ZEIT, describes the pandemic as an opportunity for "tyrants and tyrants-to-be". Those making foreign and development policy must monitor this carefully. The Covid-19 pandemic is a catalyst for democracy's demise.

Autocratisation processes had already overtaken democratisation processes at global level in 2019, the first time this had happened since 2001. Autocrats in Hungary, India, Brazil and Turkey are now exploiting the pandemic in order to weaken parliamentary scrutiny and massively restrict civic freedoms; repression against opposition groups is on the rise in Rwanda, the Philippines and Uganda. While democracies are by definition better equipped to limit the long-term effects of restrictions on freedom imposed due to the pandemic, there is no guarantee that they will be untouched. The economic downturn during the 2008 financial crisis already had far-reaching political consequences, giving rise to a number of populist and nationalist governments.

Democracies are better equipped to managing crises

If societies are to get through the pandemic peacefully, then we now need collective expertise, trust, and solidarity, both domestic level and in the cooperation between countries. This is better achieved in a democracy, and between democracies, than in an autocracy.

The imperative of making collective decisions in light of major uncertainty is a key feature of societal crises. Confidence in political institutions and policy-makers is key in this context. Discussing factual arguments publicly, balancing interests, and transferring the power of interpretation to state institutions is part and parcel of making decisions in a democracy.

In autocracies, the power of interpretation in public matters rests with a single, central authority. Consequently, autocracies are all the more reliant on public trust. Where citizens' confidence in the regime is waning risks of protests and upheaval works as an incentive for the state to increase repression. Even where populism buttresses a "strong man" or "strong woman", public trust can quickly dissipate if in the eyes of the people, this individual fails to manage the crisis. We see this emerging not only in the United States, but also in developing countries with weak institutions and autocratic leadership. Loss of confidence in autocratic governments may

result in calls for more democracy but it can also result in evaporating social cohesion and extended political instability.

But what if neither institutions nor political elites act in the interests of the common good or take heed of public correction? What if freedom of expression is restricted and it is not possible to come to a broad understanding on measures to curb the health crisis? Added to this is the fact that autocracies undermine solidary behaviour through the principle of mutual social control, which is intended to inhibit solidarity between groups critical of the system. Mistrust begins to prevail whenever state and social control gain the upper hand. It is then the state that decides, based on its own criteria, which lives will remain unharmed. In the short term, social control is an effective means of combating a pandemic, but in the long term, it costs more lives in authoritarian contexts.

Protecting democracy globally – long overdue, but now urgent

The pandemic has made the world-wide autocratisation trend more visible, but also contributed to its recent surge. Protecting and promoting democracy must therefore be central to the response in the international cooperation context. The global pandemic can only be tackled effectively over the longer run through transparent and trust-based international cooperation. Scientific cooperation drives medical research. To this end, it is essential that nations exchange reliable, empirical data with one another. However, data can rarely be accessed freely in autocracies and when accessible is often not reliable. The effective deployment of German and European development funding requires that political elites in developing countries provide accurate information about their populations. This requires openness, freedom of information, freedom of speech and ability to critique openly without the fear of harassment – democracy.

When it comes to international development policy, it is not enough to simply support the development of health care systems. Whether or not such systems work for everyone depends on whether or not it guarantees equality for all its citizens. At geostrategic level, success on the part of autocracies such as China and Singapore in tackling Covid-19 can give the impression that these nations are more capable. This risks increasing the appeal of their political model in developing nations. The Covid-19 crisis shows that protecting the bodily integrity and the dignity of the individual has been a prime concern in Germany and many European countries. This can only be achieved in democracies. Promoting these values in work to combat global pandemics is not only a matter of solidarity, but also serves countries' own foreign policy interests, and the human rights and liberties of their citizens.