

The “New Normal” in International Politics: Clash of Globalization and Authoritarianism by Egemen BÜYÜKKAYA & Yasemin DURMAZ

From the earlier days of coronavirus pandemic, there have been discussions of whether this pandemic could possibly alter the world order. This question does not have an answer yet, however, scholars argue that this shift could reverse some patterns of international and national politics and everyday life for the better or worse and arguably could be connotated a “critical juncture”. In this essay, we will be reflecting on various approaches and possibilities in discussion regarding the pandemic in the perspective of whether it is indeed a critical juncture that could initiate structural or systemic changes on national and international levels.

Beginning to the analysis on the international level, the ongoing outlook of the system has been reversed. Since the end of the Cold War, the US-dominated neoliberal system has been the international world order. With the increased adoption of the neoliberal system, states have left market regulatory policies to free-market ideology. This was amplified with the notions of free trade, financialization, globalization, and privatization. As Fukuyama argues that liberal democracy is the enduring ideology after the elimination of alternative ideologies throughout history.¹ In addition, globalization has brought about increased international economic cooperation and political interdependence.

Changing Trends in Global Leadership: Battle of Ideologies

Today, we witness the unending struggle of every country against the interminable challenges of the pandemic. However, we see that some countries act more successfully in containing the virus while others are not. Many people give all of the credit to “authoritarianism” and its coercive techniques in the fight against coronavirus by the example of China against the United States. To cope with the pandemic, both of these world powers employed fundamentally different strategies and scaled up their prolonged rivalry to a new level. We now see the competition between China and the United States not in terms of trade, but in terms of "ideological responses" to the global health crisis.

In previous decades, the United States, representing liberal democracies, has acted as the "global pioneer" on many levels before the Coronavirus pandemic. However, with the cataclysmic spread of COVID-19, US Government's incapability to contain the virus and provide necessary social protection to its citizens compelled us to question whether we can still see the US as the global pioneer. On the other hand, China's "authoritarian" success in containing the coronavirus has received high acclaim but also some criticism. While many contrives and organizations praised China's valuable donations to Africa and the developing world, the US officials saw these attempts to “forestall closer scrutiny” in the international arena and criticized China regarding hiding information about the outbreak from the world.²

Nevertheless, we cannot project whether China will be able to protect its position as the "pandemic leader" after a possible global containment of the coronavirus. It is also unwise to say that the "isolationist" policies and unraveling of distrust will move the US away from its global leadership position. It should also be noted that these trends, the US towards isolationism and China towards authoritarianism, are not novel and were already present before the coronavirus pandemic. However, for the time being, it is admirable for the

¹ Fukuyama, F. (1992). *The end of history and the last man*. New York: Free Press.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/18/health/coronavirus-who-china-trump.html>

international community if the US and China set their differences aside and involve in global cooperation.³

Isolationism over Globalization: The End of International Cooperation?

In order to combat the dispersion of pandemic further, many states have closed their borders and hindered any movement of people across borders. These lockdowns have also affected and disrupted the immensely integrated global economy as the consumption and production have decreased. The interconnected economies started to return to their internal markets, and most started domestically producing tradable commodities such as health utilities. With the decreased volume of global trade, one of the worst recessions of world history has started. Therefore, there has been unprecedented challenges and impacts on the global economy.

It could be argued that this exogenous shock to economies has also affected the governments' place in the economy. It has been almost five decades since the governments were pushed out of economic activities when the liberal system took over as the only functioning way. However, with the coronavirus we encountered increasing reliance towards governments to solve the dysfunctions stemming from the pandemic. For instance, Spain has nationalized all private hospitals to combat the virus.⁴ Thus, this could signal government reappearance with more responsibilities and presence. Moreover, because of the economic downturn many people were left unemployed which caused millions of people to apply to unemployment pay and sought assistance from the government.

Today, we can develop vaccines or implement advanced quarantine techniques; however, we still lack to contain coronavirus fully. Therefore, we started to close our borders, which were disappearing due to the hyperglobalization of the 21st century. However, the apparent retreat from globalization in the pandemic period as citizens look out for their national governments rather than international organizations to contain the virus.⁵ In this period, cooperation is also much costlier as air travel is scarce; human interaction is limited and carries the risk of infection. Therefore, solitude is prevailing for countries in the international arena, and everybody is on their own. This global confinement much challenged the international community's ability to respond to global thematic issues such as climate change and sustainability, which require global solidarity.

Retreat from globalization also compel us to reconsider the advantages of Multinational Corporations (MNCs) and Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs.) As biggest benefactors of hyper-globalization, MNCs hold various facilities in the developing world and contribute to countries local growth and development. With the elevated interactional and logistical costs, new trends suggest that MNCs can draw their resources from the developing world to the developed world, negatively affecting developing countries. Another issue of concern is on the Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs.) Many experts are concerned that IPRs that are held by big pharmaceutical companies may induced very high prices for COVID-19, which the Least developed and developing countries and the poor may not afford, causing people to greatly suffer from preventable diseases.

³<https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/06/how-will-coronavirus-reshape-democracy-and-governance-globally-pub-81470>

⁴<https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-spain-nationalises-private-hospitals-emergency-covid-19-lockdown-2020-3>

⁵ <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/how-world-will-look-after-coronavirus-pandemic>

Two Sides of One Coin: Revival of Fascism or Social Democracy?

In addition to lockdowns and travel bans applied by most of the countries, president Trump has suspended all immigration to the country amid the spread of coronavirus.⁶ Even though, it was introduced as a temporary order it could reside longer than predicted. Similar measures are taken throughout Europe and other countries. The resentment against immigration has been on the rise in the world politics and parallel to the rise of populist leaders, therefore, these measures against movement of people and migration could impact societies' approach to these issues and possibly increase xenophobia. There has been increasing reports of xenophobia and racism around the world while human rights authorities sought to raise awareness.⁷ Keeping in mind that immigration was an issue for Western developed countries long before the coronavirus and it is likely that it will fuel the discontentment against foreigners and could serve to strengthen the hands of populist leaders.

On the one hand, more government involvement, rise of xenophobia and authoritarianism could lead to the revival of seemingly dead radical ideologies such as fascism. Throughout the history, we have seen rise of populist and fascist movements in times of crises. Critical junctures and chaotic situations could provide a room for radical measures and thoughts and coronavirus could fuel those sentiments across the globe. On the other hand, on a more positive note, the change could come in the way of rising social democracy. Depending on the severity and length of the pandemic's effects, this could have an influence on the rise of social democratic values in the societies and could possibly reflect on the upcoming elections. All political and economic sufferings due to coronavirus could constitute more socially distributive societies and ideally strengthen the notion of welfare state vis a vis the free market.

Enhanced Surveillance versus Personal Privacy: A Dualistic Security Dilemma

The outbreak of virus steered many governments to take higher surveillance measures to prevent the spread of virus and thus, personal data and privacy became contested issues. Surveillance technology has been around for some time; but coronavirus has accelerated the process and governments expanded their use to track individuals and populations. In other words, Big Brother is back, and his hands reach further than before. Countries in Europe are mostly using aggregated and anonymized cell phone data supplied by telecom companies to track people's movements whereas in Israel, South Korea and Ecuador, authorities are including personal details and breaching personal privacy. For instance, China is employing artificial intelligence (AI) such as smart thermal scanners and facial recognition technologies to track the spread of virus in public places.⁸

People anticipate continued use of surveillance measures in the post-Covid period. A survey conducted in the USA demonstrated that 79% of respondents worry that their government would continue to pursue intrusive tracking measures.⁹ Even though, in the beginning, these measures were portrayed to be temporary, they could remain as tools of the government for the upcoming period or until a vaccine is available for mass production and distribution. Nevertheless, surveillance technologies, declaration of lockdowns and other similar

⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52363852>

⁷ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/03/1060602>

⁸ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/covid-19-surveillance-threat-to-your-rights/>

⁹ <https://www.techrepublic.com/article/79-of-americans-fear-government-surveillance-during-covid-19/>

authoritarian measures worry societies in the sense that these measures could become frequently resorted pattern of policies.

On the one side, some scholars highlight the importance of building trust in the institutions of the state rather than putting surveillance measures. In the ideal context, people should enjoy both privacy and health and not choose in between. Thus, some argue that when people trust in the institutions and facts are shared to them, there is no need of centralized monitoring as self-motivated and well-informed citizens are more effective than watched-upon population.¹⁰

The downside of enhanced surveillance is not only the employment of highly intrusive methods but also the significant risk for political abuse of these measures.¹¹ In governments where corruption is high and transparency is low, the surveillance measures' abuse is more likely. Some public authorities might desire to take the political advantage of citizens' constant whereabouts and activities. An interesting aspect to examine in the upcoming months and years would be the removal of surveillance tools regarding their resilience to question their correlation to regime types.

Extreme Reliance on Coercive Techniques: The New Normal of Political Behavior

Many scholars accept the pandemic effects in strengthening the state and reinforcing nationalism. However, the extent of this process dramatically varies across countries. Nearly all countries employ broader national security measures to deal with this global threat; some only remain by informing and warning the public; some go as far that welding the outer doors of houses so that people wouldn't be able to go out. We also see measures that remind us of the measures of military administrations in the 20th century. During this period, a considerable portion of the world got accustomed to curfews and states of emergency, which we would starkly oppose in our previous lives.

The mentioned slide towards authoritarianism is not novel as the novel coronavirus. Before the pandemic, democratic backslide was already present and evolving in many countries. Coronavirus has only acted as a catalyst for such processes. By making do of the windows of opportunity due to coronavirus, many countries started to expand their executive power and limit individual liberties. Especially in countries where military officials wield extensive political power, such as Myanmar, we can see that their hold onto power is further consolidated. Additionally, in Hungary, capabilities of the opposition were significantly undermined as the Hungarian Parliament endowed the Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to "rule by decree," without parliamentary consultation, indefinitely until the pandemic ends.¹² Although this power was given to Orbán to deal with pandemic emergencies, he issued more than 100 decrees; many are not related to coronavirus.

The pandemic also critically affected electoral processes around the world, many of which are suspended or postponed. This environment challenges the notion of leadership when citizens are in their direst need to choose their right leader. In some countries, suspension of electoral activity has left populations to endure outdated or corrupted leadership. However, some states also came out to be innovative in developing voting methods that could be used

¹⁰<https://nbanet.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/60-MA-NEWS-NBA.pdf>

¹¹<https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/06/how-will-coronavirus-reshape-democracy-and-governance-globally-pub-81470>

¹²<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/26/hungarian-government-to-end-orbans-rule-by-decree-legislation-emergency-coronavirus>

during global or national emergencies such as digital voting or voting by mail. When elections are made possible, current conditions make us question whether a level playing field between parties can exist during the pandemic, which can yield fair and free results. Many scholars suspect that incumbent governments could use the pandemic conditions to their advantage by priming the agenda on coronavirus and lending pre-election transfers to citizens to guarantee their votes. This aspect adds another dimension to pandemic period elections and their liberal vulnerabilities.

Conclusion

Considering the complex multidimensional impact of coronavirus on our lives and the unraveling of the strenuous environment of international politics, we suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic can be evaluated as a "new historical divide" from many levels. On this occasion, we can follow Thomas Friedman, a Pulitzer Prize winner New York Times columnist, as he says: "There is the world BC — Before Corona — and the world AC — After Corona."¹³

Since the unraveling of the pandemic, we have faced something that our generation has never experienced, a problem that is growing not on a constant rate, but "exponentially." The exponential growth of global coronavirus cases has compelled us to change our approaches and perceptions also exponentially.¹⁴ Therefore, the pandemic period induced some global trends to accelerate, some to decelerate exponentially.

What are these trends, what our post-pandemic world will look like? Harvard International Political Economy Professor Dani Rodrik puts that "The relationship between markets and the state will be rebalanced, in favor of the latter. This will be accompanied by a rebalancing between hyper-globalization and national autonomy, also in favor of the latter. And our ambitions for economic growth will need to be scaled down."¹⁵ Additionally, Stephen M. Walt, Harvard IR Professor, claims that "COVID-19 will create a world that is less open, less prosperous, and less free" by emphasizing that the fundamental conflictive nature of world politics will be unchanged.¹⁶ However, not everyone is pessimistic about the post-corona future, Princeton IR Professor, G. John Ikenberry acknowledges that world's initial reaction would be nationalistic; however, he believes that, in the longer term, "the democracies will come out of their shells to find a new type of pragmatic and protective internationalism."¹⁷

In conclusion, we believe that the pandemic period should not be abused for political benefit, and governments should act carefully not to hinder long-term international cooperation. We must acknowledge that the human suffering is widespread and unchanged, and only with right policies across this delicate historical divide, we can help future generations to create the right platform to deal with the ensuing fundamental issues of humanity effectively.

¹³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/17/opinion/coronavirus-trends.html>

¹⁴ <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-03-21/How-has-the-coronavirus-pandemic-become-a-new-historical-divide--P2oDIf6Bnq/index.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/three-trends-shaping-post-pandemic-global-economy-by-dani-rodrik-2020-05>

¹⁶ <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/how-world-will-look-after-coronavirus-pandemic>

¹⁷ <https://tbsnews.net/coronavirus-chronicle/how-world-will-look-after-coronavirus-pandemic-59878>

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In previous decades, the United States, representing liberal democracies, has acted as the “global pioneer” on many levels before the Coronavirus pandemic. However, with the cataclysmic spread of COVID-19, US Government’s incapability to contain the virus and provide necessary social protection to its citizens compelled us to question whether we can still see the US as the global pioneer. On the other hand, China’s “authoritarian” success in containing the coronavirus has received high acclaim but also some criticism. While many contrives and organizations praised China’s valuable donations to Africa and the developing world, the US officials saw these attempts to “forestall closer scrutiny” in the international arena and criticized China regarding hiding information about the outbreak from the world.

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international community if the US and China set their differences aside and involve in global cooperation.

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are taken throughout Europe and other countries. The resentment against immigration has been on the rise in world politics and parallel to the rise of populist leaders, therefore, these measures against the movement of people and migration could impact societies' approach to these issues and possibly increase xenophobia. There have been increasing reports of xenophobia and racism around the world while human rights authorities sought to raise awareness. Keeping in mind that immigration was an issue for Western developed countries long before the coronavirus and it is likely that it will fuel the discontentment against foreigners and could serve to strengthen the hands of populist leaders.

On the one hand, more government involvement, the rise of xenophobia and authoritarianism could lead to the revival of seemingly dead radical ideologies such as fascism. Throughout history, we have seen a rise in populist and fascist movements in times of crisis. Critical junctures and chaotic situations could provide a room for radical measures and thoughts and coronavirus could fuel those sentiments across the globe. On the other hand, on a more positive note, the change could come in the way of rising social democracy. Depending on the severity and length of the pandemic's effects, this could have an influence on the rise of social democratic values in the societies and could possibly reflect on the upcoming elections. All political and economic sufferings due to coronavirus could constitute more socially distributive societies and ideally strengthen the notion of welfare state via the free market.

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The mentioned slide towards authoritarianism is not novel as the novel coronavirus. Before the pandemic, democratic backslide was already present and evolving in many countries. Coronavirus has only acted as a catalyst for such processes. By making do of the windows of opportunity due to coronavirus, many countries started to expand their executive power and limit individual liberties. Especially in countries where military officials wield extensive political power, such as Myanmar, we can see that their hold onto power is further consolidated. Additionally, in Hungary, capabilities of the opposition were significantly undermined as the Hungarian Parliament endowed the Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to "rule by decree," without parliamentary consultation, indefinitely until the pandemic ends. Although this power was given to Orbán to deal with pandemic emergencies, he issued more than 100 decrees; many are not related to coronavirus.

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