Democracy and Corona (Covid-19): Discussion on Current Trends

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Abstract: In several newly independent states the practice of liberal democracy met with numerous quandaries causing its complete decay. However, following the end of cold war democratic wave swelled in different parts of the world and good-governance and democracy turned out to be congruent. Subsequently, discrepancy stemmed between procedural and functional facets of democracy generating divergent types of autocratization and constraining democratic space amid absence of accountability in a number of countries. Within this setting at the end of 2019 took place Covid-19 that steadily submerged the entire world rendering its multifarious distressing outcome. The pandemic at the same time influenced the sphere of democratic modes of governance. The structures correlated with democracy hence are adversely affected along with their corresponding roles in the political order. The present article poses an overview of such issues triggered by the on-going pandemic.

Keywords: Democracy, Governance, Pandemic, Autocratization.

Introduction

The world witnessed the ascendancy of western type of liberal democracy and subsequently its imitation in the newly independent states after the second world war. However, the practice of democracy in many cases, met with numerous predicaments resulting into its overall erosion. After the end of the cold war, democratic revivalism took place in different parts of the globe. Such trend was regarded by some western scholars as 'third wave of democracy' and within new international world order good-governance and democracy became compatible. In this new context, the inevitability of democracy was explained as the 'end of history'. Later an imbalance followed between procedural and practical aspects of democracy producing different forms of illiberal authoritarian trends and limiting democratic space amid absence of responsibility in several states. Such trend was observed even in the western developed countries where a negative attitude had been visible among the people on the performance of their central political leaders and state of politics. Fielders (2012: 1) notes that although twenty first century confirms the triumph of democracy the negative trends create an unprecedented predicament all over the world. 'Citizens around the world appear to have become distrustful of politicians, skeptical about democratic institutions, and disillusioned about the capacity of democratic politics to resolve pressing social concerns.' Within this milieu at the end of 2019 took place covid-19 or corona pandemic that gradually engulfed the whole earth rendering its multidimensional devastating consequences.These include the crises in health, economy, society, politics, education, mobility, religious practices, psychology, familial relations, behavioral patterns,

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intra and international ties and the like. The pandemic affected the realms of democratic ways and governance as well. The structures and building blocks associated with democratic order are thus affected negatively along with their role-playing in the political system. In the meantime, scholars and pundits, the world over are making intensive discussion, and evaluation regarding the multifarious consequences of the pandemic. The present paper specifically highlights the issues and factors in the realm of democracy and related processes caused by the pandemic.

It is discerned that Covid-19 is spreading at the time when the process of democratic erosion and decay have already taken place. As such there is an apprehension that corona pandemic may turn into apandemic of democracy itself.The predicaments caused by corona may be short as well as long term leaving its devastating outcomes.

While assessing the global state of democracy in 2020 (Working paper, University of Sheffield, 2020) the democracy related research organizations in their reports find a downward tendency in practicing of democracy. The Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) says democracy is ill and its promise needs revival. Similarly the Variety of Democracy (VDEM), Center for Future of Democracy, Pew Research Center, and Freedom House separately find that autocracy accelerates in the world, there is erosion of democratic institutions, commitments to democratic ideals erode and democracy and pluralism are under assault.

It is to be noted here that the weaknesses in the democratic structures in different countries are not caused by Covid-19. However, this pandemic strengthens and intensifies the already existing crises of democracy. As such the previous trend of authoritarian practices, lack of proper oversight of the executive, intolerance, political polarization, problem of penetration, low political trust, minimal respect for the democratic values, and the like have been deepened by the pandemic-created environment.

Long before during the 14th century the black death negatively impacted inter group relations and mutual-cooperative activism. Equally, the Spanish flu of 1918 destroyed social trust and created long term social disruption. Those pandemics also led to erosion of international cooperation and aggravated conflicts. Until now the present Covid-19 also does not project global concerted action to deal with the crisis. Instead there has been rise of animosity between the global powers. Examples are on-going Sino-US conflict, US decision to leave the WHO and recent India-PRC border war.

In the following paragraphs the effects of Covid-19 on democracy and governance affairs are discussed with illustrations.

Extension of executive authority

With the spread of the pandemic in most of the countries there is a great expansion of executive authoritarian practices. Such trend is against keeping democratic institutional balance. The decisions the executive made in most cases include total or partial lockdown,

ban on physical mobility of the citizens, closure of offices, curfew, and declaration of emergency in the context of deteriorating scenario. Needless to mention that during emergency executive powers expand and leading to loss of human rights. Until now emergency has been declared in more than 50 countries and the illiberal rulers have extended their authoritative powers. As for example the prime minister of Hungary Victor Orban has imposed his authoritarian rule all over the country through promulgation of a decree. The Pilipino parliament has given unlimited powers to President Rodrigo Duterte. The government of Cambodia exercises emergency powers in a similar manner and Russian president Vladimir Putin will remain in office till 2036. V-DEM report says that there is decline of democracy in 48 countries due to Covid-19 with visible public resilience.

Decline of Democratic rights

Constitutions of all democratic countries uphold human rights. Corona has intervened such sphere and limits the right of freedom, right to speech, right to assemble, right to protest, right to work. Education, health, leisure etc. Concerned institutions and oversight agencies also are not seen active. The parliamentary structures, judicial bodies, NGOs, and civil society organizations' activities remain mostly unnoticed to demand responsibility of the governmental performances.

Constitutional government

The essence of constitutional government is controlled government. Democracy never thrusts absolute power to any state authority that leads to principles of separation of powers, checks and balance, and inter-organ oversight and power relationship. In presidential as well as parliamentary systems the legislative committees perform important oversight functions including ensuring transparency, accountability, and participatory process. War and grave natural crises always empower the executive for quick decision-making and covid-19 is no exception. As such the parliamentary sessions aremade short. In Australia, Austria, and Belgium the number of attending MPs decreased, Canadian parliament remained closed for 5 weeks, and quorum was fixed to 20 out of 338 MPs. US and British legislatures are considering the issues of proxy and remote voting.

Third wave of autocratization

Autocratic trends stem from the authoritarian practices of the elected governments as the V-DEM reports. As many as 92 countries and the G20 nations including USA, Brazil, India, Turkey are under such inclinations leaving limited democratic space for the stakeholders. A sort of self-imposed censorship is noticed amid state surveillance. Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen remarked that even in Indian democratic process there are hesitations to express views and unobstructed opinions.

Recently there are debates whether democratic governance or autocratic system perform better in addressing the problems created by the pandemic. One view maintains that in

those societies where exists the culture of obedience, common endorsement for stringent measures including strict lockdown or curfew is more likely. As such in China it has been easier for the central leadership to implement rigorous measures through collectivist culture despite absence of transparency. Gorodnichenko and Roland (2015) earlier mentioned that collectivism underscores group allegiance, compliance and subservience towards superior that makes collective action simpler. On the other hand, in individualistic societies individual interests predominate over collective welfare.

Political participation

One negative consequence of Covid-19 is the absence of widespread participation of the citizens. In democracy there are different modes of political participation and of them the most significant is election. Meanwhile several countries have postponed their national, regional, and local polls. The Election Commission of India postponed the Rajya Sabha election in March 2020. Similarly, Pakistan and Indonesia suspended their by-election and local government elections, respectively. In 12 states in the USA the primary elections and in the UK local polls were postponed. Such absence of democratic elections leads to crisis of legitimacy of the incumbents in different tiers of government.

Governance

Democracy and governance are closely intertwined and go simultaneously. The major pillars of governance namely, accountability, transparency, predictability, regulatory quality, participatory process, and control of corruption are affected undesirably by the current pandemic. There are several instances of mal-governance during this pandemic including theft and corrupt practices like stealing relief goods in Bangladesh, irregularity in PPE in Slovenia, and theft of 140 crore dollars in the USA in distributing government's cash assistance for the affected. During corona, there are escalation of clientelist ties, opportunism, smuggling, price-syndicate, health section irregularity in different countries.

Political Process

Political process in democratic countries is visible through partycracy involving both ruling and opposition parties. During corona pandemic the political activism of most political parties and their organizational actions are constrained.Usual public meetings, party conventions and the like are not seen as before. In Zambia opposition demonstration has been banned. In Bolivia, Russia, Romania, and Bosnia criticism of government is suppressed and the independence of the media is compromised. Israeli prime minister endeavored to control the Knesset by quelling the opposition. In Venezuela, the opposition are under harassment by authoritarian directives.

Bureaucratization

In order to cope with the pandemic bureaucratic decision-making and bureaucratization of

policy implementation have been observed in different countries including Bangladesh. In Iran, Peru, South Africa, and Israel military steps are taken. In Pakistan, the top concerned positions are controlled by the military leaders keeping the prime minister Imran Khan in dark. Corona has thus influenced the civil-military relations. In India, the law enforcing agencies have done excesses on the public to strictly enforce the directives. In South Korea and Israel, smart phone location data are imposed. The government of Egypt forced one journalist to leave the country. Authorities of Thailand and Jordan have obtained the power to suspend the freedom from suppression. There are also instances of social media monitoring in some countries.

Socio-political cohesion

Covid-19 has not affected uniformly although rich, poor and all sections of society are infected by the virus. The pandemic has created distance between the rich and poor, rural and urban places, citizens and migrants and above all social cohesion. Social distancing damaged social solidarity and created political polarization among the competitive forces and groups in India, Brazil, Venezuela, Bolivia, Poland and the USA through prejudiced behavior and denunciation.

Role of Extremists

On-line attempts of the extremists are detected during the pandemic. These groups remain alert by using virtual platforms. Bodies like HijbutTahrit, Ansar Al-Islam, Al-Queda are doing on-line propaganda through different apps and virtual training for the terrorists are also known. According the recent reports covid-19 situation aggravated violent extremism in the horn of Africa, Lake Chad basin, and Sahel region. Boko Haram meanwhile has intensified its strike in Lake Chad basin.

Some Positive Trends

During the pandemic inspiring initiatives and human welfare performances of the non-state actors have been observed. Such welfare programs are accomplished by means of informal governance. Besides non-state actors, various civic groups, local representatives, welfare associations, and bodies like Biddanondo in Bangladesh have been seen engaged in distributing reliefs, cash support and food to the affected sections and specially the poor. These endeavors contribute to create social capital and benevolence.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier democracy is declining but fact remains that only a democratic system cannot ensure its effectivity against the on-going covid-19 pandemic. Aurel Croissant remarks that what is important is political will and the existence of a responsible authority to properly implement the decisions taken in a democratic manner. Also important is information openness, transparent crisis management and public overseeing. Democracy

and good governance demand adaptability, innovative approach, awareness, and pragmatism foraccurately dealing with the crisis of all sorts including the current covid-19.

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