

# THE UNPRECEDENTED IMPACTS OF COVID-19 AND GLOBAL RESPONSES

EDITED BY  
**FARHANG MORADY**



**UNIVERSITY OF  
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# **THE UNPRECEDENTED IMPACTS OF COVID-19 AND GLOBAL RESPONSES**

*Editor*

**Farhang Morady**

## **The Unprecedented Impacts of COVID-19 and Global Responses**

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## **The Unprecedented Impacts of COVID-19 and Global Responses**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Democratic Education Network (DEN) is an extracurricular establishment at the University of Westminster that was formally launched in 2016 with the full support of the Quintin Hogg Trust (QHT) and is operated with the help of a diverse mix of students, alumni and faculty. Every year, it strives to work on an array of different projects. Publishing the annual book is among the more intensive projects, requiring consistent and systematic collaboration from a range of different participants.

This year, this task became all the more challenging as the team was pushed to join forces virtually due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet it also became the core theme of this year's book, as we realised that this was an opportunity for us to discuss emerging issues in a novel but highly relevant contemporary context. And after months on end of virtual teamwork, we are delighted to be presenting this end-product which reflects the efforts and input of many. All articles in this book have gone through a process of edits and revisions by the DEN student editorial team, supervised by Dr. Farhang Morady.

Our special thanks to Dr. Peter Bonfield, Vice-Chancellor of the university; Dr. Sal Jarvis, Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Education; Dr. Dibyesh Anand, Head of the School of Social Sciences; Dr. Gerda Wielander, Associate Head of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences; Dr Magdalena Frennhoff Larsén, Assistant Head of the School of Social Sciences; Irene Queralta Santamatilde, Westminster PhD student and long-time DEN contributor; and Westminster alumni Gabriele Piazza, who has edited our books in the past and continues to be a source of support. Their insights and words of encouragement during our meetings went a long way in motivating the team to put forward their best efforts week in and week out.

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## FOREWORD

I am delighted to have been invited to write a forward for the 2021 issue of the DEN Journal. The last year and a half has been a year with the most extraordinary challenges in it, and so it is right that this journal should focus on the social, political, economic and legal impact of COVID-19 around the world.

I strongly believe that respectful, inclusive dialogue and collaboration must underpin the problem-solving that is needed now if, globally, we are to grow forward successfully from the pandemic. The collaborative work of the University of Westminster Democratic Education Network (DEN) Team, coming together as students from across the world to learn, grow and develop ideas together is an example of exactly what is needed from the world's leaders right now.

**Dr. Sal Jarvis**  
**Deputy Vice Chancellor, Education, University of Westminster**



# INTRODUCTION

*Farhang Morady, Cassidy Mattingly, Saudamini Sigdel and Kate Vasiljeva*

Since its launch in 2016, Westminster's Democratic Education Network (DEN) has been a hub for academic staff and students to collaborate in the design, development, and implementation of projects. DEN is proud to engage diverse students with different abilities, ages, social, ethnic, economic, and educational backgrounds. DEN develops projects that bridge the University with local communities in London as well as international partner universities. It places the University of Westminster in a unique position, where it provides much more than a comprehensive academic curriculum; it also offers education beyond borders in a truly global fashion while being mindful of individual and local specificities.

The University of Westminster's biggest challenge has been finding ways to engage students outside the curriculum, especially those who do not meet the usual criteria for enrollment at the established or top universities. Various studies have presented considerable evidence to demonstrate the vital role that engagement plays in students' learning; hence, the university has always explored new ways of teaching and engaging our students, with particular attention being paid to the experiences of underrepresented and disadvantaged students at all levels. The internationalisation of higher education has added to the diversity of the student population, placing additional attention in the university's management and academics on how to culturally and socially integrate students.

The growing role of information and communication technologies, especially since the outbreak of COVID-19, has also played a significant role in shaping the thinking of academics seeking to use the best practices to encourage and foster student engagement. Therefore, DEN has developed new online strategies to sustain its activities. Employing a creative and imaginative approach, the academics and students worked collaboratively to co-create and work in a new environment.

Students have gradually but enthusiastically embraced the new online learning mode, where, performing with no criteria or grading system and working voluntarily, they have delivered projects online. They have expressed their passion and desire for learning, working together regardless of their geographical locations.

## INTRODUCTION

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Hence, they develop new democratic skills by working online in a friendly environment by encouraging each other and ensuring respect and equality.

The unique online engagement has facilitated the use of knowledge exchange activities with local communities and international partners. DEN has placed the University in a unique position where it now provides onsite and online comprehensive extra-curricular activities to engage students. DEN offers education beyond borders in a genuinely global fashion while being mindful of individual and local specificities.

We have expanded student's skills and knowledge widely. One of DEN's objectives is to encourage the development of educational strategies and practices. We have done this with care, mutual understanding, and respect for academics, students, and support staff. The collaboration between academic staff and students with common aims and goals has become a fundamental principle in DEN's objectives. Through this collaboration, and working on different projects, DEN has looked for the best practices to engage students and develop learning materials in the classroom.

The academic program has prepared students for professional life, but DEN also ensures that they are equipped with a good understanding of their society locally and globally. The academics' willingness to go beyond their subject expertise in teaching has been a crucial part of DEN. Through practices with some years of experience, DEN has become a platform for interning and mentoring students. Thus, in working as a community we have involved our alumni and post-graduate students in supporting the process of mentoring our undergraduate students with DEN's projects. Hence, DEN has shown awareness and taken on board a responsibility for improving Westminster students' future employment and post-graduate studies.

In DEN we have looked for different strategies, outside of students' courses and fields of study, to support their educational journey. We have built a bridge between students' courses and DEN's projects. For example, three Politics and International Relations modules: "Learning in an International Environment", "Energy and Development in the Middle East and Central Asia," and "Political Research and Practice," are closely linked to DEN's project.

DEN has undertaken various extra-curricular projects to develop and support students' learning: the online magazine, the virtual field trip, the international students' conference, and the annual book. The magazine focuses on publishing shorter articles; the field trip seeks to introduce students virtually to the workings of various international organisations; and the annual conference provides students with the opportunity to share insights from their research with the potential to publish it in DEN's annual edited volume, which includes articles on local, global, social, political and economic issues.

The publication of this year's book involved 25 participants: undergraduate, post-graduate, alumni, and academics in the School of Social Sciences. For 22 weeks, we met online once a week. We organised schedules, peer-reviewed papers and presented students' articles, among other activities. As a group, we also took the initiative to develop guidelines regarding the publication process of this monograph. Our combined efforts have culminated in this collection of articles, which explore different but interrelated themes of governance during and after the COVID-19 crisis.

The pandemic highlighted the global differences in the capacity of states to manage a large-scale crisis, underscoring the ways in which regime and economic structures can limit the potential of success in eradicating the virus. **Part 1, 'The Global Management of COVID-19'**, explores these differences, investigating various institutions, actors, and the multifaceted ways in which they have interacted with each other to mitigate this unprecedented global crisis.

Over the past decade, the world has witnessed patterns of rising levels of the introduction of non-democratic regimes such as authoritarianism, in comparison to the neoliberal, 'traditional' democracy observed in developed nations in the Global North. **Part 2, 'Non-Democratic Responses to COVID-19'**, shines a spotlight on the ways in which the pandemic has accelerated the erosion of democracy and facilitated the normalisation of non-democratic governance. In particular, the articles in this section have highlighted the role that state structure, governance, and ideology plays in the administration of public-health measures.

The COVID-19 pandemic has proved to be not only a healthcare challenge, but also a major threat to the economic stability of countries across the globe. Moreover, it has become a substantial cause for concern for longer-term economic prospects, raising apprehensions about the likelihood of declining standards of



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living for certain communities. However, economic transitions have also served as a driving force for success in the management of this global crisis. **Part 3, 'Economic Challenges of COVID-19'**, showcases a range of theoretical and practical measures taken that have either proved extremely effective or lackadaisical in their approach.

A defining issue of the past decade has been the struggle between energy-led development and the obstacle of surmounting the deleterious impacts of climate change. **Part 4, 'Energy and Development in the Era of COVID-19'**, has drawn on themes of energy and its role in the development of the Middle East, and how this has evolved since the outbreak of COVID-19. It also touches upon the possible pathways of energy and development in the future, illustrating how sustainable growth might be achieved in the post-COVID era.

For nation-states worldwide, the immediate management of COVID-19 was but half the battle, leaving a lasting impression on various aspects of socio-political and economic life. The arduous challenge of purposeful recovery from this unparalleled predicament has served as a driver for change moving forward. **Part 5, 'Legacies of COVID-19 and Future Implications'**, exposes the multitudinous ways in which the world has sought out a transition from a state of emergency into a spirited revival. By challenging the existing norms, this unprecedented crisis forced us to reconsider the manner in which governance is practiced, which is explored through an array of perspectives in this section.

Collectively, this selection of articles examines the various implications that the pandemic has imposed upon communities across the globe. By investigating the various ways in which countries have been affected by and concurrently recuperated from the global plight imposed by COVID-19 virus, the articles in this special edition book cover a wide range of issues that are germane for the contemporary climate of the political world. Using a multidisciplinary approach, the articles seek to enrich the reader's understanding of the vast range of ramifications induced by the global emergency, which has dominated political agendas since its onset.

PART I

**THE GLOBAL MANAGEMENT OF COVID-19**



# 1

## NGOS IN THE ERA OF COVID-19

*Zohra Shamim*

### **Abstract**

As governance has shifted, becoming a more global phenomenon, political economic actors, such as international governmental organizations and non-governmental organizations, have grown in importance. NGOs play a major role in various areas including global governance, diplomacy, humanitarian aid and advocacy. The unprecedented challenge the COVID-19 pandemic brought with it has contributed to understanding both the roles and significance of different types of NGOs. This article focuses on the French medical NGO 'Médicins du Monde' and the Bangladeshi development NGO, The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC). Although these NGOs are essentially situated in one state, they work in states on a global scale. Through examining and analysing the structures and activities of these two NGOs, their role during the COVID-19 era is discussed. Moreover, it is understood that NGOs play a vital role especially during global challenges such as a pandemic, when national governments cannot alone manage to fulfil the needs of the population.

### **Introduction**

The Post-Cold War era led to a new world order in which the West is politically, economically, and socially predominant. States have not remained the most prominent political economic actors. The emergence of globalisation has turned out to be among the most influential changes in human society, and through it actors such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have become more common. As defined by the World Bank, NGOs are "private organizations that pursue activities to relieve suffering, promote the interests of the poor...or undertake community development" (Malena, 1995, p. 16). Each NGO has a different role. Currently, with the COVID-19 pandemic, the requirements of NGOs are increasing, and thus it is important to examine their effectiveness. In this paper, I will look at two NGOs: the French 'Médicins du Monde' or Doctors of the World and the

Bangladeshi 'BRAC'. By examining, analyzing and assessing these NGOs, I will conclude that their activities are aligned with their objectives. Hence, they are capable of effectively dealing with crises such as COVID-19, which threatens both the healthcare and the economic or political development of states.

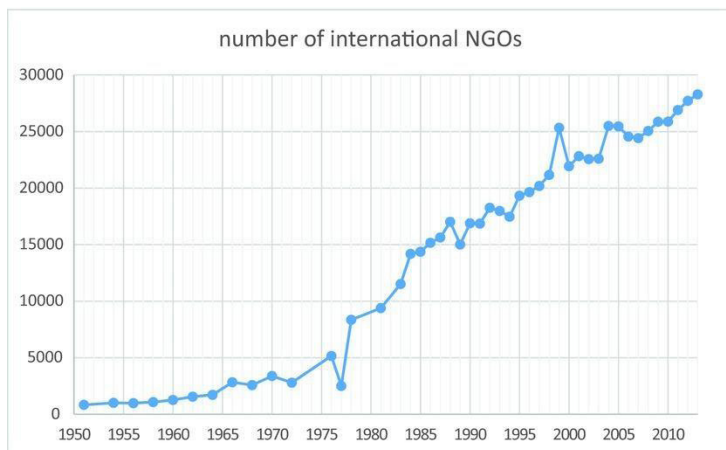
### **The Role of NGOs**

The emergence of novel political and economic power raises questions regarding the role of NGOs within fields of international relations and international development. Through globalisation, non-state actors such as NGOs have been gaining prevalence in recent years. They were first mentioned in the United Nations 71 Charter, and one of their key features is that they are non-profit entities independent from the government. The neoliberal development model has immensely developed the private sector, which provides an alternative method to development (Wegner, 1993). This phenomenon revolves around both national and transnational activities and challenges ("NGOs, Social Movements"). Due to the criticism to which state-centric governance has been subjected regarding the marginalisation and exclusion of certain groups as well as their interests, NGOs have become more significant global actors. Each NGO has a different purpose and deals with a specific sector, such as economic development, advocacy, and humanitarian aid (McGuire, 2013). The spread of NGOs has been especially observed in underdeveloped states and those that have remained quite stagnant in terms of development. The purpose of an NGO is to stimulate political, social or economic development or improve a particular sector such as healthcare or education. Although many tend to argue that the emergence of NGOs and their role in development has minimised state-led models, it must be taken into account how NGOs and the state collectively work for the purpose of development. Evidently, investment is required; thus, the government or national banks finance such active organisations contributing to fulfilling its development objectives (Salehuddin, 1999).

It is understood that NGOs vary when it comes to their roles, as comprehended through their strategies and objectives. An important point to note is that they do not exist to replace the roles of the state, as they solely attempt to tackle the national or even international tasks that the state has failed to succeed in. Realists tend to question the roles of NGOs, arguing that they are simply being used as political tools by more powerful states to expand their influence and for vested

interests. However, statistical data shows a substantial growth in the number of NGOs. In *Figure 1* below, it can be seen how, from the 1950s to 2010, there was a persistent increase in the number of international NGOs, demonstrating the need for NGOs to tackle global and national challenges.

*Figure 1*



Source: *Development NGOs: Basic Facts, 2018*

### **A Medical NGO: Médecins du Monde**

Médecins du Monde (MDM), also known as Doctors of the World, is a medical NGO based in France, founded in 1980. It works in France and 64 nations all over the world (Médecins du Monde). Each NGO fulfils its purpose in a different manner; MDM does so through campaigning and advocacy initiatives specifically related to health and access to healthcare services. To understand the ways in which MDM operates, it is important to examine both the aims and structure of the organization. The chief aim of MDM is to improve local capabilities and efficiency to develop services including harm reduction, drug overdose management, and mental health services (IDPC, 2021). As stated on its website, MDM is fundamentally oriented to “creating a structure ready to address emergency situations in the shortest possible timescale, something which is not always feasible for international institutions” (Médecins du Monde). This network consists of

15 member organizations and around 14,177 paid staff, as well as unpaid volunteers who work on 355 active health projects in different states (*ibid.*). There are 5 key areas of campaigning for MDM, a fact that demonstrates how structurally organized the NGO has been over the years. These areas are: working with crises and emergencies, promoting sexual and reproductive health, harm reduction, fighting HIV, and caring for migrant and displaced populations. Thus, it is understood that the structure of MDM is based on advocacy initiatives and campaigns for humanitarian aid and medical care around the world.

As discussed above, the NGO works with populations that are experiencing crises or emergencies. Palestine has been subjected to occupation and political turmoil for the last 70 years. MDM has been working in the Occupied Palestinian Territories to provide the necessary medical and healthcare facilities for emergencies. It has been developing a coordination of activities, particularly in relation to healthcare, in Palestine. An example is the 2018 Great March of Return, when “more than 18,000 people were hurt during the demonstrations that took place on the border between Israel and Gaza.” During this incident, the organization aided Palestinians by providing emergency services at numerous healthcare centres, and training was provided to the staff in 11 healthcare centres, to ensure that the healthcare provided there was being managed efficiently. MDM does not merely provide healthcare facilities during such emergencies, when civilians are killed or terribly injured, but also spreads information, as an important part of its advocacy. In 2019, MDM also collaborated with Palestinian NGOs (PNGO) as well as the Culture and Free Thought Association, focusing on psychosocial support and mental health. They provided 9,901 psychological support consultations, while assisting the staff at 44 health centres in developing their emergency services (Médicins du Monde, 2020).

Similarly, MDM has conducted a successful campaign caring for members of migrant and displaced populations. MDM works with Iraq to provide humanitarian aid and healthcare services in the Chamishko camp. The Chamishko camp is the largest of several camps for internally displaced people situated in the Dohuk region of Iraqi Kurdistan. MDM has addressed the healthcare needs of the 27,000 residents of the camp, by providing emergency relief and medical services. By working with the most vulnerable populations of various nations, NGOs such as MDM become capable of supporting individuals whom governments tend to marginalize. MDM has allowed vulnerable populations in Iraqi Kurdistan to easily

access effective healthcare facilities, including primary healthcare, sexual and reproductive healthcare, and mental healthcare. According to the MDM website, this “is a central element in the challenge of resettling these communities, which have been severely affected by the Iraq conflict” (Médicins du Monde, 2020). In 2019, MDM facilitated 75,687 primary healthcare consultations at health centres, 4,152 consultations for mental health challenges and psychosocial support, and 6,631 sexual and reproductive health consultations in Iraq.

In France, more than 3 million persons, making up 14% of the population, are experiencing the consequences of poverty. The vulnerabilities that poverty involves, which negatively influence the social and economic conditions of many individuals, have led to rising health inequalities. For this reason, MDM has created healthcare and advice clinics, providing both medical and social assistance for individuals. It works on meeting the basic welfare needs of the population, such as housing, food, and medical care. Unlike private medical centres, CASOs do not require appointments and have no restrictions on who can be a patient, instead offering equal medical care and health services for all. This shows the effectiveness of this NGO, as it has been capable of tackling the welfare challenge of the French population. Another example is the Support Health and Coordination Network created by MDM in 2013. This sector works particularly in rural areas of France. In the small town of Combrailles in the Auvergne region, it provides easier access to healthcare and services. By 2016, REDCORDA was also able to successfully provide access to care, health rights, and prevention of diseases in the Upper Aude Valley in the Occitania region (Médicins du Monde, 2020).

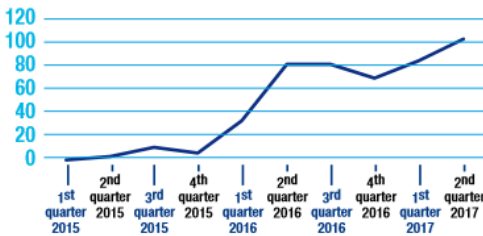
The actions discussed above have constantly been maintained and monitored through local meetings, in which the actions are discussed that the MDM team will then carry out. This contributes to assessing the NGO’s administration. Through the organization maintained by the administration of the NGO, it becomes more effective in supporting the needs of the population and evaluating the health procedures required. Through such actions and initiatives, the NGO remains effective and transparent in accomplishing its objectives and goals. In the case of MDM, its main objective is simply to provide healthcare facilities and access to health services to vulnerable populations. The organization has helped many people, as is clear from statistical data. In *Figure 2* below, the growth in the number of survivors who were provided with medical services from MDM is quite persistent – from 0 up to 100 between 2015 and 2017. This not only



highlights the effectiveness of the NGO, but may also indicate how it has developed over the years to meet the needs at a better quality and level.

Figure 2

**Number of survivors  
who received both medical  
and legal services**



Source: *Médicins du Monde*, 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has completely transformed the global order and demonstrated that national governments are not enough to maintain the effects of the COVID-10 virus. COVID-19 has caused at least 3,788,943 deaths around the world, perhaps many more (Elflein, 2021). This has brought more attention to the need for medical NGOs such as MDM. Low- as well as medium-income nations have been greatly affected by COVID-19 (Marcel, 2020). Because of the vulnerabilities of the population, the pandemic caused a deterioration in health-care systems and capacities (Médicins du Monde, 2020). Rather than being solely a health challenge, it became a political, social, environmental and economic crisis. This is why more diverse responses were needed. As a response, the NGO has been implementing a variety of programs to fight the pandemic. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, MDM has implemented programs fighting COVID-19 in 67 different countries, on every continent.

Furthermore, it is important to take into account the important role of national governments in the activities carried out by NGOs. As discussed above, Palestine is subject to occupation and has faced various challenges because of this. This has made it even more difficult for Palestinians to survive the pandemic, and because

of this MDM has been very involved in supporting the people of the Occupied Palestinian Territories. For COVID-19 in particular, France provided MDM with supplies and equipment such as important medicines and personal protective equipment (Médicins du Monde, 2020). This has helped MDM in its emergency relief and medical support in Gaza. Through this, MDM has played a major role in sustaining Palestinian healthcare services. Overall, the way MDM has responded to the pandemic in various states demonstrates the effectiveness and need for NGOs during the current era.

### **A Development NGO: BRAC**

The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) is a development NGO founded in 1972. Its chief objectives include eliminating extreme poverty, economically empowering people who live in poverty, training the underprivileged by developing skills, improving healthcare, investing in quality education, and ensuring gender equality (BRAC, 2021). While it mainly operates out of Bangladesh, over the years BRAC has expanded and now also works in many other states, including Afghanistan, Liberia, and Myanmar.

Development NGOs implement projects such as those BRAC has engaged in over the years. An example is the organisation's human development package, which is called the Rural Development Program (RDP). It focuses on poverty alleviation and has so far involved around 3 million households and approximately 60% of Bangladesh's villages (Salehuddin, 1999). As noted above, development NGOs such as BRAC bring about development through strategic plans focused on objectives. This makes it necessary to assess the organisation and examine how it has brought about development. Firstly, an organisation requires an adequate management infrastructure that is continually operating. As such, BRAC utilises a results-based management (RBM) approach, maintaining transparency and accountability within. This is one of the ways to ensure efficiency and stability in such an organisation. According to the Department for International Development Report for 2011, BRAC has been shown to be effective in 12 development factors including health, microfinance, education, sanitation, and community empowerment (Mushtaque, 2014). It is a 'South-to-South' initiative that has expanded the organization and objectives to a global level.

Bangladesh is considered to be one of the world's fastest emerging economies. Yet, a lot of its workforce lacks the necessary skills and most of its youth are unemployed or underemployed. In response to this, BRAC has initiated apprenticeships in enterprises as well as institution-based training, created a market development strategy to improve working conditions, and implemented sector strengthening to improve business and management capacity by forming relations between the public and private sectors. This has led to 348,816 people being aided with skills development and 75.71% of students securing jobs after graduating, with 55% being female (BRAC, 2021). BRAC has hence developed the skills of the population through this initiative, while ensuring that both men and women participate in the economic development of the nation.

Likewise, BRAC has been working in Myanmar, focusing particularly on providing microfinance facilities to the population marginalized by the formal financial system. As a result, the NGO has distributed 34 million US Dollars in the form of loans, with 47,000 of the borrowers being female. Essentially, states that are considered to be underdeveloped face gender inequality, and BRAC has recognized this development challenge. Additionally, the NGO launched an emergency response programme in 2016, through which it has strengthened its capacity to cooperate with organizations in the states it works in. This method ensures that the national strategy and policy-making develop sufficiently to tackle "disaster risk reduction and management" (BRAC, 2021).

North Bengal often experiences drought, making aquaculture difficult as fish are very rare to find. BRAC introduced a project called "Women's Empowerment by Contributing to Aquaculture and Nutrition," abbreviated as WE-CAN. This increased women's participation and helped keep aquaculture possible (BRAC, 2021). The project is focused on the production and consumption of nutritious fish, while nutritionists provide the population with appropriate information on the benefits of the fish that can be used to guide households. This project enhances the skills of the individuals, which is vital for development to be sustainable. The organization has also worked with the World Bank, for instance, to improve the infrastructure by implemented the Road Safety Program. In Bangladesh, approximately 1.3 million people are vulnerable to dying from road accidents, and this initiative has brought at least a 50% reduction in road fatalities (BRAC, 2021). Overall, projects led by this NGO show that it is effective in fulfilling its objectives, thus contributing to development and sustainability.

On the other hand, there are some areas that appear to be weak in fulfilling development objectives. Even though BRAC has been actively working on stimulating development, it seems that the rich are getting richer whereas the poor are getting poorer. Ultra-poverty is the inability of households to meet their most basic needs. In a 5-year period, the organisation's poverty reduction initiative resulted in a decline in moderate poverty by 9%, though ultra-poverty rose by 18%. Obstacles such as the fall in BRAC's credit and growing loans hindered its results, showing it to have had a rather negative impact on development (Develtere, 2005). This shows that there are still major problems facing NGOs such as BRAC, and that may hamper their ability to meet their objectives in the future. Poverty reduction is one of the major goals for achieving sustainable development at an international level, and it is one of the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. Such initiatives require the ability to provide loans through which poverty can be eliminated, as can be observed in the organization's micro-finance programs (Mohammad Kamal, 2012).

It is evident that COVID-19 has completely changed the circumstances faced by every nation. For several months, until July 2020, BRAC was operating remotely, while it continually planned and analyzed the impacts of the pandemic around the world. Members of the organization have examined the different ways in which they could deal with the effects of the pandemic and enhance the skills that can lead to sustainable development. Similar to the French MDM, BRAC has targeted vulnerable populations during the pandemic. Due to its past experience in tackling outbreaks of HIV, TB, AIDS, and Ebola, this NGO has shown a reasonable capacity to meet its goals. In Bangladesh, it has helped in maintaining a strong partnership between the government and the public health sector and has been supporting the healthcare needs of much of the population (BRAC, 2021). Although BRAC is essentially a development NGO, it has been quite effective during COVID-19, due to the reports and examinations through which it has been able to develop its strategies.

As a strategy for managing and coping with the COVID-19 pandemic, BRAC has utilized its strong capacity for networking throughout Bangladesh. It has transformed itself during the crisis and become a platform of innovation and coordination as well as support. The NGO has maintained good relations with the government and public health sector. Through this, it has been able to reach out to the most vulnerable parts of the Bangladeshi population, while focusing

on humanitarian development (BRAC, 2021). This demonstrates the leadership skills of this NGO, as well as its capacities during emergencies like the pandemic.

### **NGOs in the Post-COVID-19 World**

The account of the two NGOs, MDM and BRAC, provided above clearly demonstrates the significant roles that such organizations can play in different fields within international relations and international development. However, it is also important to note that the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the role of NGOs in world politics. In fighting against the COVID-19, states recognized the need to interconnect and manage the unprecedented global challenge. “To implement appropriate and effective global actions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, NGOs, in official partnership with UNESCO, have created a social media network of solidarity in order to interact with their local associations” (UNESCO, 2020).

It may be argued that this era of the pandemic has strengthened relations between states, due to the mutual challenges as well as the interests involved (UNESCO, 2020). Furthermore, it has been observed that NGOs tend to fulfil needs that governments undermine or are incapable of meeting. This is evident in the activities carried out by MDM and BRAC, as discussed above. There may be several reforms that NGOs need to be more effective, such as better administration and more investment in their projects to fulfil their objectives, but they are the most effective and influential organizations aimed at these objectives in existence today. Towards the end of the twentieth century, the idea of a world divided into a ‘Global North and South’ ceased to be applicable. The geopolitical and economic groupings among states shifted governance into a more globalized phenomenon, simultaneously giving greater importance to other political- economic actors.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, NGOs and their roles have become very significant in modern politics, as is demonstrated through various economic, social and political developments. This can be understood through their effectiveness as observed in the examples of France’s MDM and Bangladesh’s BRAC. It may thus be argued that actors other than states are necessary to tackle problems effectively, especially during crises such as that of the COVID-19 era. Both MDM and BRAC have demonstrated

significant efficacy over the years, in dealing with the needs of populations and creating a safer, more developed and secure environment on a global scale. The world may continue to undergo major changes and power may become distributed in different ways; the contemporary era is transitioning into a political-economic order that is in-between state capitalism and private capitalism. Due to this, globalisation will continue to play an important role in the world's societies. The roles of NGOs in an era marked by the COVID-19 pandemic has become even more vital. This is because the world order has been transformed, requiring interdependence and interconnectedness among nation-states and other political economic actors to an even greater extent than had been the case until this time.

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# 2

## US SANCTIONS AND IRAN'S MANAGEMENT OF COVID-19

*Katarzyna Ozga*

### **Introduction**

The relationship between the U.S. and Iran has been tense ever since the Iranian Revolution in 1979. It improved temporarily in 2015, when the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or the so-called Iran Nuclear Deal, was signed between Iran and the P5+1 (UNSC permanent members and Germany). It 'placed significant restrictions on Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief', which was an important step toward the normalisation of relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the major global powers (Robinson, 2021). After Donald Trump became President of the U.S., he ordered a withdrawal from the agreement. After four decades of sanctions on Iran, coming both from the U.S. and the global community, its economy and development have been heavily affected. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic introduced an ethical question into the debate. Should sanctions be continued, considering the major global health crisis that puts everyone around the world at risk? By the end of 2020, Iran had recorded more than one million detected cases and over fifty-three thousand deaths because of the disease. While some critics argue that the sanctions imposed on Iran significantly impacted its capability to react effectively to COVID-19 (Cheraghali, 2013; Dodangeh, 2020; Salehi-Isfahani, 2020), the U.S. special representative for Iran, representing the Trump administration, believed that the latter is entirely a result of an incapacity intrinsic to Iran. This article will attempt to assess the impact of the sanctions on the Iranian economy. In doing this, it will look at the definitions of sanctions and their historical role in Iran-U.S. relations. I will then examine the impact of sanctions on Iran's ability to manage the COVID-19 outbreak since 2019.



## Great Powers and Sanctions

Sanctions as a tool of coercion have been used since World War I. Article 41 of the United Nations Charter enables the Security Council to impose sanctions on particular states to ensure international peace and security (UNSC, n.d.). The most commonly used types of sanctions are economic, diplomatic, and military ones. They are most often used to 'advance a range of foreign policy goals, including counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics, non-proliferation, democracy and human rights promotion, conflict resolution, and cybersecurity' (Masters, 2019). Case studies from Cuba (Barry, 2000), Haiti (Gibbons & Garfield, 1999) and Iraq (Scherrer, 2011) demonstrate that the long-term impact of sanctions on development, the economy, and the well-being of the population can be even greater than in the aftermath of wars. Scherrer even goes as far as calling the UN sanctions on Iraq a genocide (Scherrer, 2011). This is linked with an allegation that economic sanctions hit the most vulnerable members of society hardest. Due to the currency devaluation and rising prices that may be caused by the sanctions, they fall deeper into poverty, and thus are unable to access education or healthcare, or obtain nutritious food (Human Rights Watch, 2019). On the other hand, supporters of the use of this tactic argue that sanctions are a more humane way of persuasion than military action, which often results in civilian casualties, damage to infrastructure, and political chaos.

The U.S. has been using different types of sanctions as a way of pressuring Iran to adjust to international norms ever since the Iranian Revolution in 1979. These have included restrictions put on Iranian government assets, the prohibition of financial transactions with Iran, blocking the 'property of certain persons', and embargos on their exports (U.S. Department of the Treasury, n.d.). The main reason behind imposing various forms of restrictions, both on the country and some influential Iranian persons, has been to cause a severe financial hardship which, it is hoped, will force Iran's authorities to abandon its nuclear programme (Van de Graaf, 2013) and restrain it from supporting other regimes in the region (Champion & Motevalli, 2020). Before 1979, Iran and the U.S. were close allies (Wise, 2011). However, this changed after the revolution that overthrew pro-U.S. government of Mohammad Reza Shah and led to ideological changes in the country. Its new leadership openly criticized the West and blamed the U.S. for Iran's internal economic problems. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, sanctions imposed by the U.S. 'were intended to try to compel Iran to cease supporting

acts of terrorism and to limit Iran's strategic power in the Middle East'. Ever since the beginning of the 2000s, they have been used predominantly to 'force Iran to curb its nuclear program' (Congressional Research Service, 2020, p. 1). In 2015, United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2231 created the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), 'enabling Iran to pursue an exclusively peaceful nuclear programme' (Gov.uk, 2020), which led to lifting many of the previously-imposed sanctions. In May 2018, the U.S. withdrew from that agreement and reinstated the restrictions, which are still in force today. Although the Security Council rejected restoring the sanctions entirely, the constraints imposed by the U.S. alone have had an enormous impact on Iran's capacity to trade with other countries, due to the risk of secondary sanctions for the trading partners and the dominance of the U.S. dollar in the international market.

As a global economic superpower, the U.S. is able to put the whole world under considerable pressure to not have any trading relations with Iran. Even powerful players such as China and Russia do not officially trade with Iran, because they fear facing retaliation from the U.S. administration. This situation is an example of how the U.S. is able to impose its power on the rest of the world. While 'imperialism' used to be linked to colonialism and the expansion of territories, today's definitions concern the proliferation of political influence, economic domination, and propagation of the goals of 'globalization, development, and racial equality', thus widening the sphere of domination exercised by countries like the U.S. (Brantlinger, 2018). The U.S., as arguably the most powerful country in the world, manages to maintain its dominance because of its strong economy and its having the largest defence budget in the world. Its military budget is significantly higher than that of any other country, it has military bases in every region of the world, the U.S. dollar is the currency used in many transnational transactions, and it is a permanent member of the UNSC. All of these things confer on it immense political power. Therefore, despite other countries refraining from imposing extensive sanctions on Iran after the U.S. withdrawal from JCPOA, the single U.S. action of imposing sanctions has largely prevented global trade with Iran.

The most telling recent expression of U.S. imperialism is the signatures on the Abraham Accords between Israel and two Arab states: Bahrain and the UAE, facilitated by the U.S. (Aljazeera, 2020a). The main objectives of this agreement are (1) normalisation and development of ties between Israel and the UAE/Bahrain, in the first such extensive official agreements between that predominantly

Jewish country and Arab states, (2) economic, medical, technological, and telecommunications co-operation, and (3) development of the 'Strategic Agenda for the Middle East' to expand regional cooperation (Goldberg, 2020). The last point is significant in the context of Iran because it means strengthening the local anti-Iran coalition, which can contribute to the further alienation of that country within the region. It will also 'strengthen U.S. ties with its key Middle East allies', while it 'curtails Iranian freedom of operation in the region' (Norlen & Sinai, 2020). This agreement is yet another example of how the U.S. is able to influence global politics.

The Abraham Accords is another strategy used by the U.S. to impact politics in the Middle East and to strengthen the alliance against its biggest regional opponent - Iran. It has several implications on the local and global political situation. First of all, American authorities try to maintain their reputation as the global 'peace-maker' by bringing together historically opposed sides: Jewish and Arab states. This narrative is important in the context of the U.S.'s foreign policy goals as it justifies its involvement in various conflicts around the world. Additionally, the signing of the Abraham Accords has impacted global power relations, because the main rivals of the U.S. - China and Russia - are supporters of the Iranian regime. If Iran is allowed to grow with the support of those two countries, the U.S.'s position in the region could be endangered. Through further alienation of the Islamic Republic, American authorities seek to confirm their global hegemony and ensure that they will continue to control the situation in the Middle East. This is significant in the context of the growing importance of China, which threatens the U.S.'s position as the most influential country in the world.

### **Sanctions on Iran**

In discussing U.S. sanctions against Iran, it is worth asking: are the sanctions themselves a cause of Iran's problems or is Iran solely responsible due to its lack of compliance with international norms and its irresponsible policy-making? The current sanctions are a response to Iran's nuclear programme, which according to the U.S. is a threat to international security (Abrams, 2020). Ironically, the U.S., which has pushed this agenda the most, owns the world's largest arsenal of nuclear weapons (Arms Control Association, 2020). It is also the only country in the world that has ever used them in warfare. According to the Trump administration, sanctions are not to be blamed on the U.S., but on Iran, for its lack of

compliance with international standards and the JCPOA agreement, to which the U.S. added criticism of the effect of internal issues on Iran's capabilities (Share America, 2020). Additionally, the U.S. accuses Iran of prioritising expenditures on 'military adventures' at the expense of protecting its own population (Champion & Motevalli, 2020). The government website *Share America* even goes as far as claiming that the 'Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has prioritized funding the Iranian regime's terrorist proxies and security forces over paying the health care workers fighting COVID-19' (Share America, 2020a). According to the World Bank, Iran's military expenditure was equivalent to 2.3 per cent of its GDP in 2019, which is lower than it was in 2015 when JCPOA was signed and is also lower than the percentage of GDP that the US has been spending for the last twenty years (World Bank, n.d.[a]). Iran also spends less on defence than its major regional enemies Israel and Saudi Arabia (Rome, 2020). Therefore, the remark regarding defence expenditure is highly politicised, especially considering the U.S. involvement in the region and its efforts to strengthen the regional alliance against Iran through the signing of the Abraham Accords. The Trump administration argues that the imposed sanctions are indispensable by referencing a moral imperative to prevent Iran from sponsoring terrorism and expanding its nuclear programme. Considering the history of U.S. involvement in the Middle East, this reasoning can be considered as a way to protect American self-interest and weaken its opponents, rather than as a way to bring peace to the region.

## COVID-19 in Iran

COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. It was first discovered in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, and from there it began to rapidly spread worldwide. A global pandemic was announced in March 2020, and by the end of that year, there had been more than 75 million confirmed cases and more than 1.5 million deaths worldwide (WHO, 2020). On February 19, 2020, Iran had its first case of COVID-19, and since then has been one of the worst affected countries globally. By the end of 2020, Iranian authorities noted more than 1.1 million confirmed cases and over 53 thousand deaths. As of December 17, they had a rate of 21 per cent positive tests per all the tests conducted, while the WHO suggested that 10 per cent or below is an adequate rate of testing (Our World in Data, 2020). Iran has been struggling to contain the virus and its medical facilities have been heavily affected. To analyse whether the U.S. sanctions have impacted Iran's ability to respond effectively to COVID-19

pandemic, it is necessary to observe the Islamic Republic of Iran's health care system capability over the years.

A program called 'Primary Health Care' (PHC) was implemented in Iran between 1979 and 1984 to ensure universal access to healthcare across the country. It was followed by another significant reform in 2014 (Tabrizi et al., 2017), because of which 'about 90 per cent of rural and 75 per cent of urban residents are covered by some form of government-subsidized health insurance' (Salehi-Isfahani, 2020). Due to the implemented changes, the country noted a rapid improvement in various health indicators, and its healthcare system has been widely praised around the world. Despite the improvements made, it is still facing serious problems, including a shortage of funds for health facilities (Dodangeh & Dodangeh, 2020) and inadequate access to medicines and medical equipment (Cheraghali, 2013). This second issue is closely linked with restrictions imposed by the U.S., which ultimately influenced Iran's capability to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The American administration maintains that humanitarian aid, food, and medicines have been exempt from the recent sanctions, to prevent an adverse impact on the Iranian population. Nevertheless, the constraints associated with 'money transactions, proper insurance and sometimes assurances that the item indeed was exempted from the embargo' made the purchase of food, medical equipment, and medicines much more difficult than before (Share America, 2020). This becomes apparent when looking at Iran's imports of medical drugs and devices, which fell from \$176 million in March 2018, before the tightening of the sanctions by the U.S., to \$67 million one year later. Although Iran produces the majority of the medicines that it needs domestically, it relies on importing more advanced medication from abroad (Shams, 2019), including most of those used to treat COVID-19 patients. All of this impacted the cost of health and medical services, which were 19 percent higher in March 2019 than at the same time a year before (Statistical Centre of Iran, 2019). The numbers show clearly how the healthcare and pharmaceutical sectors have been affected by the imposed sanctions, and why amid the COVID-19 pandemic the country has struggled to keep the number of cases and the death rate low. The long-term consequences of the restrictions include worse physical health of the Iranian population, which makes it vulnerable to health crises, and has socio-economic implications that will be affecting the society for decades to come.

One of the biggest obstacles that hospitals in Iran have been facing ever since the outbreak in early 2020 is a shortage of medications and personal protective equipment (PPE) caused by the sanctions, thus putting medical staff and patients at risk (Dodangeh & Dodangeh, 2020). A report prepared by Human Rights Watch found that ‘sanctions have largely deterred international banks and firms from participating in commercial or financial transactions with Iran, including for exempted humanitarian transactions, due to the fear of triggering US secondary sanctions on themselves’ (HRW, 2019). The situation worsened in 2020 as the restrictions were tightened. Additionally, hospitals became overwhelmed with three major surges of cases that happened in a span of less than a year, which can be partially blamed on the government. It took authorities a few weeks before they halted flights from China, as the information about the virus was announced, and they were reluctant to introduce restrictions and were also blamed for insufficient testing. Iran’s Minister of Foreign Affairs claims that they ‘are stymied in [their] efforts to identify and treat [their] patients; in combating the spread of the virus; and, ultimately, in defeating it [COVID-19], by the campaign of economic terrorism perpetrated by the government of the United States’ (General Assembly, 2020). The President of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, also openly criticised the sanctions, which according to him, make importing medicines extremely difficult and hinder Iran’s effort to obtain vaccines (Associated Press, 2020). Amid COVID-19, the extension of sanctions by the U.S. in September 2020 was openly criticised by UN Secretary-General António Guterres (Aljazeera, 2020), as well as Russia and China, and even rejected by Britain, France, and Germany as illegitimate (Ching, 2020). Despite calls for loosening restrictions, the world is still mostly abiding by the rules as other nations fear retaliation from the U.S. This has had a profound impact on the ability of the country to respond to the crisis, especially in the initial phase when it required large supplies of PPE and medication. Although the authorities in Iran could have responded in a more effective way to the pandemic, their options were severely restricted.

### **Economic Implications**

Besides healthcare, it is also important to look at the financial aspects of the response to the COVID-19 crisis. Before the pandemic, for two consecutive years, 2018 and 2019, Iran experienced negative growth in its GDP, which fluctuated around minus 6 per cent annually (World Bank, n.d.[a]). It entered 2020 with inflation nearing 40 per cent (World Bank, n.d.[b]), while its crude oil exports

fell to 7% of the total it used to sell before the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA agreement in 2018 (Champion & Motevalli, 2020). The visible decline of Iran's economy since 2018 is directly linked to the imposed sanctions. Not only did the U.S. impact Iran's capability to trade with it and its allies, but also effectively discouraged other foreign companies from doing business with the Islamic country by using its leverage as the financial capital of the world. It is estimated that the sanctions imposed by the Trump administration since May 2018 'deprived [Iran] of an estimated \$150 billion' (Heiat, 2020). The economic decline that continued ever since 2018 severely impacted Iran's financial capability after the pandemic started at the beginning of 2020. Although having a strong economy has not been a precondition for an effective reaction to COVID-19, as the responses of some of the richest countries in the world, including the U.S. and UK, were among the most criticized, it does help to ensure financial support for affected businesses and population. For example, the UK paid for millions of employees to be on furlough ever since March 2020 until April 2021 in order to save jobs, prevent a rise in unemployment indicators, and support businesses (Gov. uk, n.d.). Similarly, the U.S. passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, which provided \$2 trillion for economic relief for workers, small businesses, and the U.S. population in general (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2020). While those governments were able to obtain loans so that they could afford their stimulus packages, Iran's request for a loan from the IMF was blocked by the U.S., which significantly restrained its capability to support its struggling economy (Champion & Motevalli, 2020).

Iranian authorities have introduced several economic stimulus measures to counter the COVID-19 impact on the economy. These include: (1) The allocation of 7 per cent of its GDP to a moratorium on tax payments, (2) the assignment of 2 per cent of GDP to the health sector, (3) the allotment of 4.4 per cent of GDP to 'subsidized loans for affected businesses and vulnerable households' (KPMG, 2020). Initially, the steps taken by the government helped to curb the spread of the disease; however, the economic cost of implementing social distancing and the lockdown became too high to maintain the measures in place. This led to a rapid worsening of the situation in the summer, and again in late autumn 2020, resulting in a dramatic decrease in the per capita household expenditure, which fell by a third since COVID-19. The Statistical Center of Iran estimates that, as of summer 2020, approximately 1.2 million people had lost their employment due to COVID-19 and the sanctions (Rashid, 2020). If we compare this with the same

time the year before, it represents a decline of 5 per cent. While the COVID-19 crisis heavily affects economies and people around the world, the economist Salehi-Isfahani estimates that as many as 13,000 deaths could have been prevented in Iran, had the U.S. eased sanctions amid the pandemic (Salehi-Isfahani, 2020). This shows that although sanctions are an economic tool used to put pressure on authorities and affect their decisions, they have the greatest impact on the civilians who are caught in between the political games.

## Conclusion

There is a lot of disagreement regarding the effectiveness and purpose of the sanctions. While the argument about safety that the U.S. is using to maintain restrictions on Iran is morally appealing to many, their actions have significantly impacted Iran's ability to purchase life-saving medicine, equipment, and PPE, which are key to curbing the spread and negative impact of COVID-19. Additionally, as sanctions hit Iran's economy heavily over the last few decades, especially in the years 2018-2020, the more vulnerable members of the society have been visibly the most affected as the unemployment rate rises and poverty deepens. Although Iranian authorities can be partially blamed for not taking the initiative to negotiate the restrictions imposed by the U.S., the Trump administration significantly contributed to the humanitarian and health crisis in Iran by tightening restrictions amid the deadly pandemic, which is at odds with the values of the U.S. Additionally, the rising numbers of cases and deaths, and consequently the extensive spread of COVID-19, impacted negatively not only Iran but also neighbouring countries and the rest of the world, which has been struggling with containing the virus for months. Thus, while the Iranian authorities have not been doing all that they could have done to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the sanctions imposed by the U.S. have also significantly curbed Iran's capability to respond well.

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# 3

## CORONAVIRUS: DIFFERENTIATING THE GLOBAL NORTH AND GLOBAL SOUTH

*Pardis Jallali*

### **Introduction**

In the current global economic system, capital is the primary instrument of nations in transitioning from underdeveloped to developed. Those who do not meet a Western-centric criterion are relegated to remaining in the Global South. This is why wealthy nations such as India and China are not considered to be in the Global North. Africa and South America have a combined 8.5% of the global GDP (World Bank 2019). North America alone has 26% of global GDP (World Bank, 2019). This indicates an immense disparity between the 'Global South' and 'North' in terms of wealth. The coronavirus serves as an 'external shock that will "exacerbate existing inequalities" (Hopper, 2012, p. 35) in wealth and create new ones such as involving the maldistribution of various vaccines. This can be analysed with concepts such as 'vaccine nationalism', which are used to demonstrate how underdeveloped nations are hindered by factors outside of their control. I will use case studies of the US and Nigeria to show the contrariety of these two nations attempting to contain the virus in the Global North and South. Dependency theory and neoliberal theory will be used to debate the causes of the mentioned disparity, with capitalism being the primary determinant. Policy recommendations will be suggested in the hope of mitigating the effects of the coronavirus on 'Global South' nations. In a conclusion, I maintain that the coronavirus has provided a new means of exhibiting existing inequalities that are responsible for the contemporary impediments facing the Global South's pursuit of economic prosperity.

### **Explaining the 'Global South'**

The Global South can be defined as "regions outside Europe and North America, mostly (though not all) low-income and often politically or culturally marginalized"

(Dados, 2004, p. 12). This term has no geographical credence, as Australia and New-Zealand are two of the southernmost nations yet are not considered to be in the Global South. Neither does the term have real economic credence. Both India and China are considered to be in the Global South yet are in the top 5 economies ranked by GDP (Eurostat, 2020). These criticisms of the term explain the perception of it being a Western-centric construct. Though it could be argued that China and India are not in the Global North due to having, by Western standards, low real GDP per capita figures of \$10,261 and \$2,099 (World Bank, 2020), respectively. The term is especially synonymous in reference to the African continent. With Africa being in the Global South, it has come as a surprise to many that it has had (as of February 1, 2021) only 4% of global deaths (ECDC, 2021). With Africa's generally poor infrastructure, it was expected that its hospitals would be past capacity, which has not been the case. The disparity must not be condensed to merely economic metrics, as "North and South referred not only to economic labels of being 'developed' or 'undeveloped,' but... the terms also referred to the different levels of in- or exclusion in international decision-making" (Kloß, 2017, p. 3).

As such, the coronavirus may serve to alleviate some of the negative preconceptions surrounding the term 'Global South' regarding inept governance.

## **Dependency Theory**

There is an existing disparity between Global North and South. In examining why this is the case, it is necessary to look at the theoretical underpinnings. One of these is dependency theory. It refers to a "situation in which the economy of certain countries is conditioned by the development and expansion of another economy to which the former is subjected" (Dos Santos, 1970, p. 231). In the 1960s, the disparity in wealth between the Global North and South was increasingly noticed by neo-Marxists, such that they claimed that the capitalist system enforces a relationship of exploitation where the core (metropolis) accrues benefits from the underdevelopment of the periphery (satellite). "Two nations may exchange according to the law of profit in such a way that both gain, but one is always defrauded" (Emmanuel, 1980, p. 154). This 'unequal exchange' was thought to have left the Global South 'behind' in a stagnant developmental landscape.

It is not incompetence at the domestic-policy level that has left nations in the Global South especially vulnerable to the economic ramifications of the Coronavirus. Rather, it is due to the continued expropriation of wealth that allows the “North to extract wealth from the Global South” (Hopper, 2012, p. 35). This exploitation of underdeveloped nations has been found to have a correlation to the prosperity of European nations. This is because “the rule of monopoly capitalism and imperialism in the advanced countries and economic and social backwardness in the underdeveloped countries are intimately related” (Baran, 2010, p. 403). The consequence of this continued exploitation is that the majority of nations in the Global South do not have contingencies in place to cope with the economic damage. Such contingencies would include reserve funds that can be injected into the economy in the case of a crisis.

According to dependency theory, the Global North relies on an exploitative ‘core-periphery’ relationship for the accumulation of wealth. “Dependency theory stipulates that a capitalist core will exploit an underdeveloped periphery for wealth, [as] different states perform different functions within the world economy” (Romaniuk, 2017, p. 483). The economic exploitation of an underdeveloped nation by a developed nation is encouraged under the capitalist system. Such an exploitative relationship was previously achieved under colonialism and is arguably currently occurring with the predatory nature of institutions such as the IMF (International Monetary Fund); “76 out of the 91 IMF loans negotiated with 81 countries since March 2020—when the pandemic was declared—push for belt-tightening that could result in deep cuts to public healthcare systems and pension schemes, wage freezes and cuts for public sector workers” (Oxfam, 2020). This has had severe negative implications for nations in the Global South in the context of the Coronavirus, as nations had to make commitments to paying back loans instead of recouping the losses created by the Coronavirus.

### Neoliberal Theory

In dispute with neo-Marxist dependency theory is the theory of neoliberalism. Neoliberal thought promotes greater integration into the global capitalist system. This benefits underdeveloped nations, since they have access to new avenues of economic growth (such as international trade). “It was estimated that LEDCs would only need to achieve 3% growth per annum to alleviate their debt problems, and this income could be achieved by freely trading within an open international



economy and selling their primary goods to the north” (Hopper, 2012, p. 41). “The concept of neoliberalism suggests that such economic, political, social, and cultural phenomena world-wide might be connected to larger transformations in global capitalism” (Bockman, 2020, p. 14). From this it can be inferred that the reason for the mass underdevelopment of the Global South is refusal to integrate into the global capitalist system. This rationale disputes the claim that it is capitalism and its rhetoric that has made nations in the Global South vulnerable in the wake of the Coronavirus, instead of domestic policy failures.

According to the Democracy Index, nations in the Global South are on the whole less democratic than those in the Global North (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019). Nations that are less democratic are more authoritarian, and as a result these nations presume a more interventionist role in their economy. In neoliberal theory, government action in markets is seen as ‘inept’, and “governments must refrain from controlling and directing their national economies because their decisions are invariably governed by political rather than economic considerations” (Hopper, 2012, p. 40). Neoliberalism holds that the intentions of governments when intervening are self-serving, and so the economy should be managed by a ‘small government’ (non-interventionist). It is the inability of nations in the Global South to put in place such ‘small governments’ that stunts their growth, causing these nations to remain underdeveloped. As a result, in neoliberal theory, it is not the capitalist world-system that has made the Global South especially vulnerable to the effects of the Coronavirus; rather it is supposedly the failure of decision-making at a regional level that affects the nations in the Global South adversely.

### **The Coronavirus as an Indication of Developmental Disparity**

Currently, vaccines exist that alleviate the symptoms of the coronavirus, but this is of little benefit to those living in underdeveloped nations in the Global South where vaccines are not readily available. “At least 90% of people in 67 low-income countries stand little chance of getting vaccinated against COVID-19 in 2021 because wealthy nations have reserved more than they need and developers will not share their intellectual property” (Dyer, 2020, p. 1). Manufacturers of vaccines such as Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna are reluctant to relinquish their intellectual property (which includes characteristics of the vaccine that only developers would know). This increases the potential for profit since nations do

not have the means to improvise their own vaccines. The consequence of this hyper-focus on profit is developed nations purchasing more vaccines than their population requires. “Rich countries with only 14% of the world’s population have bought up 53% of the eight most promising vaccines” (Dyer, 2020, p. 2). In general, the Global South has coped better with the coronavirus (in terms of death rates), with Africa only having 4% of the global death count as opposed to Europe’s 33% (ECDC, 2021). Yet, the prompt responses by nations in the Global South, particularly in Africa and South America, will seemingly not result in less deaths as the nations within them will not receive the vaccine at a time where a prompt response can be capitalised on.

‘Vaccine nationalism’ refers to the “situation where countries push to get first access to a supply of vaccines and potentially hoard key inputs for vaccine production” (Hafner, 2020, p. 1). Competition between nations to create a vaccine may initially be seen as beneficial, since it incentivises nations to create one quickly. In rushing a vaccine, it is likely that nations will skip some safety procedures, an example being approving a vaccine after an insufficient number of trials. Nations in the Global South, due to their underdevelopment, lack the necessary infrastructure to distribute vaccines effectively; “poorer countries may not have adequate systems to deliver and administer doses that have been manufactured in different environments, mostly found in the wealthier countries” (Hafner, 2020, p. 1). Perhaps the most impactful implication of ‘vaccine nationalism’ is that “a ‘my nation first’ approach could lead to an inefficient allocation of early available vaccines, potentially favouring individuals at less risk in high-income countries over high-risk individuals in poorer countries” (Hafner, 2020, p. 1). This difference in vaccine access is a consequence of the Global South’s underdevelopment. This ‘difference’ will result in a large number of ‘excess’ (preventable) deaths.

Conversely, it could be argued that the negative effects of vaccine nationalism are ephemeral. This is due to nations in the ‘Global North’ having an incentive to donate vaccines to their southern counterparts. Nations in the ‘Global North’ are globalised, such that they are integrated into the global economy. Failing to vaccinate the Global South will still result in economic damage to the Global North, which could “lose about \$153bn a year” (Hafner, 2020, p. 2) in the best-case scenario. This serves as a counter-argument to the claim that vaccine nationalism will cause a large number of excess deaths. It follows from the Global

South's dependence on the Global North that disparities in development exist, the difference in vaccine quantity being evidence of this.

### **The US and the Coronavirus**

Thus far, the example of Africa has been given as a region in the 'Global South' that has coped with the virus relatively well (in terms of a low percentage of deaths). The other perspective comes from the 'Global North', specifically the US, which is the nation with the most Coronavirus deaths by some margin (Eflein, 2021). This finding is a surprise, considering that the US is the wealthiest nation on earth (Silver, 2020). One would assume the US has the means to cope with the virus, but this has not been the case.

The US's failure to cope with the coronavirus can be expanded to the greater failure of the 'Global North' as "mistrust among Western allies and 'my country first' populism has led to pushback against multilateral coordination and resource sharing in response to coronavirus" (Bremmer, 2020, p. 14). 'My country first' refers to the way in which nations have competed to stockpile vaccines. These result in typically more vaccines than their population needs, as "many governments, mostly from wealthier countries, have signed direct bilateral deals with producers of vaccine candidates in order to secure a stock for their own population" (Hafner, 2020, p. 6). The US's purchasing an abundance of vaccines means that the supply of these vaccines for nations in the Global South has been insufficient for meeting their demand. The subtle implication from this is that even though nations in the Global South may enact precautions to successfully halt the spread of the virus, their efforts are undone. This is due to the 'inward looking' nature of nations such as the US.

As of January 2021, the US economy contracted by 2.5%. This can be compared with Chile, a nation in the Global South whose economy contracted by 9.1% (Trading Economics, 2020). The statistical difference is an indication that the global pandemic has adversely affected poorer nations in the Global South more than nations such as the US in the Global North. Chile and other 'Global South' states do not have the means to shield their economies from the economic effects of the coronavirus for an extended duration. This is because effective policies such as 'lockdown' (shutting down all businesses to prevent spread), cannot be sustained due to the opportunity cost of economic loss. The US is able to

withstand the economic ‘turbulence’ that these containment policies entail. This illustrates that the coronavirus is disproportionately detrimental to nations in the Global South. Although the economic data used was from Chile, this conclusion can be extrapolated to most nations in the Global South.

## **Nigeria and Coronavirus**

Diseases such as malaria are prevalent in Nigeria, and in Africa more generally (CDC, 2019). The consequence of this is that “‘physical distancing’ has become a most prominent strategy in the current context; [though] the strategy is not new as a means of containing the pandemic” (Oheneba, 2020, p. 1). The meaning of this is that African nations such as Nigeria are better suited to dealing with the Coronavirus, due to previous experiences. Evidence of this success is that Nigeria has had a low number of Coronavirus deaths, 1,752 as of February 2021 (Worldometer). This can be compared to the US, where diseases that require social distancing are otherwise not commonplace. This success in maintaining a low death count has benefitted Nigeria, insofar as it means that the nation’s infrastructure will not likely face a calamitous situation in which its healthcare system is unable to cope because beyond capacity. That is a situation that has commonly been occurring in the ‘Global North’.

In Nigeria, there are many isolated rural areas. There, it is more difficult to obtain information due to a lack of technological access. “Rural populations in Nigeria are in a disadvantaged position in terms of access to ‘info-structure’ such as fixed telephone lines and/or Internet connections” (Dahalin, 2010, p. 147).

In a situation where the Coronavirus spreads to these rural regions, citizens there will likely not be aware of the correct procedures. Furthermore, “Agricultural production is the main source of income, and every member of the community is in one way or another involved in the transportation of commodities” (Oheneba, 2020, p. 4). These citizens are dependent on income, such that they would work in high-risk (due to Coronavirus exposure) workplaces, as governments in underdeveloped nations do not have the financial means to offer ‘stimulus packages’ on the scale of the UK’s (Partington, 2020). These deaths would be a direct product of underdevelopment, as more viable means of income do not exist. This is indicative of the gulf in development between the Global South and North as applied to the Coronavirus.

Nigeria has suffered an economic contraction during the pandemic of 6.1% (Trading economics, 2020), which is more than double the economic contraction of the US. This is a substantial difference that again demonstrates the disparity between developed and developing nations. From the economic data of Chile and Nigeria, it can be inferred that these developing nations have been coping worse economically than developed nations. On the whole, the Global South has suffered the economic brunt of the virus, while the Global North has been affected more in terms of mortality rates. This contradicts the claims of there being no global developmental divide. If there were not one, surely all nations would be affected by the Coronavirus in the same way, either economically, in terms of mortality rates, or both.

### **Policy Recommendations for the Global South**

The following policy recommendations are aimed at rectifying the limitations of existing policies relating to the treatment of the Coronavirus pandemic in the Global South. Efforts to repress the virus must be made more 'localised'. That is, a rigid 'one size fits all' approach should be rejected. The circumstances of all nations are not homogenous; indeed, nations such as Nigeria have dealt the economic brunt of the virus (Worldometers, 2021), while nations such as the US have focused on reducing mortality rates. A 'globalised' approach (likely purported by the 'West') will likely omit any particular circumstances applicable only to select nations. For example, in cultural sensitivities regarding 'social distancing', the 'West' is an 'individualistic' culture that makes distancing generally viable, while cultures in the Global South are more 'collectivist', meaning a greater emphasis is placed on unity and 'togetherness'. This is evidenced in the way that "collective decisions are superior to individual decisions, interdependence, an understanding of personal identity as knowing one's place within the group, and concern about the needs and interests of others." In this regard, 'collectivistic societies' are said to include China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, India and Pakistan (Baron & Byrne, cited in Darwish and Huber, 2003, p. 49). In these countries, explaining the rationale of 'social distancing' would require a level of effort not required in 'Western' nations. "This argument for a localised response is based on the observation that all countries, including the so-called donors and development partners, are preoccupied with their national responses" (Boateng, 2020, p. 8), meaning that responses will not have an emphasis on individual applicability. A rigid Western-centric template must not be applied to nations that it doesn't fit.

## Conclusion

In sum, the Coronavirus has affected nations uniquely based on their developmental state. Developed nations in the Global North have their main damage from the Coronavirus in the form of mortality rates. This is due to their desire to preserve their economies at the opportunity cost of lives. In contrast, the Global South has primarily been affected through the metric of economic loss. The comparison of the US and Nigeria provides a practical application of the mentioned contrast, validating the claim that the North-South divide can be reflected in nations' differing approaches to the Coronavirus. The argument that capitalism does not aggravate the effects of Coronavirus is invalid, as "deregulation in the UK and USA has led to inequality, profit before people, and has led to their inability to prepare for a pandemic" (Luzmore & Mellish, 2020, p. 27). It is the exploitative core-periphery relationship, facilitated by capitalism, that has made the Global South vulnerable to the Coronavirus in a way that the Global North is not. For efforts aimed at minimising the loss instigated by the Coronavirus, it is essential that a holistic approach is taken which acknowledges the differences between respective nations. The Coronavirus has demonstrated the existence of a 'Western-centric' global system, the effects of which will persist beyond the pandemic.

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# 4

## VIETNAM'S COVID-19 SUCCESS: A PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND POLICY-RESPONSE APPROACH

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### **Abstract**

The first COVID-19 outbreak was in China at the end of 2019, and it has been a threat to humanity until now. As its neighbour, Vietnam has a shared border and a high trade volume with China; therefore, Vietnam was expected to have a high risk of pandemic transmission. Vietnam recorded its first case of SARS-COV-2 from China on January 23, 2020; however, the government effectively responded to protect its citizens. This article identifies the periods of the pandemic that Vietnam has experienced and how the Vietnamese government demonstrated its political readiness to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. These periods include those involving the cooperation among the government's public administration, an up-to-date public response in Vietnam on a multi-level basis and in terms of the inner workings of the relevant ministries to maintaining the national safety in term of economic and social stability and in diplomatic contexts. By emphasizing the importance of immediate guidelines from the government, individuals, the community, and civil society were key to fighting against this pandemic process and coordinating responses to the public health crisis. Through reports and data from the World Bank and World Trade Organization, Vietnam is considered a successful example of COVID-19 management and one of the few countries that has a sustainable and growing economy in the pandemic and post-pandemic periods.

### **Introduction**

COVID-19 has been a disaster to the entire world for more than a year. It has provoked a gigantic disease transmission that has caused a massive number of deaths all over the world. It is still an unknown dangerous pathogen, with an origin in Wuhan, China. The latest recorded statistics show that there have been

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104 million confirmed cases in the world, since December 2019, when the coronavirus arose. During the pandemic, the richer countries have fared the worst, especially the world's leading country economically, the US, where infected cases numbers have reached 26.91 million in total. The second area to have suffered most heavily from the pandemic is Europe, with the leading number of confirmed cases recorded in Italy, the UK and France. This was partly due to the conservative choice of protecting the economy as the priority, even to the point of not taking the disease as seriously as it doubtless should have been. In Asia, India and Malaysia have particularly seen a boom in the epidemic which has been fatal to their already weaker economies. Within the unprecedented disease crisis, Vietnam was extraordinarily depicted as the model of successfully containing COVID-19, and from the beginning, despite how close China is, a neighbouring country with which Vietnam shares a long border, and a common political history. With its response led by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), and combined with the support of the private sector and its citizens, Vietnam not only quickly recovered but now also appears in 2021 to have a bright future.

### **Vietnam Coronavirus**

On December 12, 2012, the first case of the coronavirus was reported in Wuhan, China, with the symptoms of exhaustion and mild chest pain that are similar to those of the SARS pandemic outbreak in 2003. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization officially announced that COVID-19 is a global pandemic, and this virus has been at the focus of a global public health crisis that has led to the deaths of millions of people. Vietnam is a country that shares a more than 128 million kilometer border with China, and has a high volume of trade with its northern giant neighbour, and had braced itself for a high risk of cross-border infections. The first case in Vietnam was recorded on January 23, 2020 and to the date of this writing (February 20, 2020), Vietnam has experienced 3 successive COVID-19 waves, has reported 3,362 cases of infection, 1,804 of recovered persons, and 35 deaths.

The first wave started on January 23 and lasted until April 25, 2020, when Cho Ray Hospital in Ho Chi Minh City confirmed that two Chinese men from Wuhan, the center of the COVID-19 pandemic, were positive with the virus and had made complicated journeys across cities and provinces in Vietnam. On January

25, Vietnam's Ministry of Health confirmed three more cases, and there were 158 cases in total at the end of this first period

After 99 days, there were no more cases of environmental transmission. On July 25, it was announced that Vietnam was in the second wave, which lasted from July to September, 2020. The SARS-CoV-2 virus attacked big cities such as Danang, a center of tourism. During this period, Vietnam confirmed 1022 cases of positive tests with this virus, including 680 cases of public transmission and 27 deaths.

The third wave boomed during the sensitive period when the 2021 Lunar New Year holiday and the National Congress were coming. The National Institute of Hygiene and Epidemiology completed the gene explanation and confirmed a new variant of SARS-CoV-2 virus, which was more dangerous, with a rate of spreading that is 70% faster than the previous one. As of February 9, 2021, Vietnam had a total of 2050 cases of COVID-19, including 1472 cases of recovery and 35 deaths.

Among countries affected by the pandemic, Vietnam faced a high likelihood of being severely affected by the spread of the disease. Although the Vietnamese health care system is under-resourced and has inherent weaknesses, the government's response to the pandemic has been commendable. Being one of the first countries classified as part of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Vietnam's public health professionals, political scientists, economists, and sociologists have been working non-stop to contain the novel Coronavirus. This report reviews the Vietnamese government's response in terms of public measures, education, economic stability, and social media policy implementation, as well as citizens' collaborations in containing the pandemic limitation.

### **Vietnam's healthcare system: Fighting the pandemic like fighting an enemy**

From the beginning of the pandemic, under the recommendation of the World Health Organization (WHO), the Vietnamese government, coordinating its efforts both nationally and locally, and including its Ministry of Health and Emergency Public Health Operations Center, along with the Centers for Disease Control (CDCs), took early measures to activate the campaign. On January 16, 2020, the Public Health Emergency Operation Center under the Ministry of Health

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published Decision Nos. 125/QĐ-BYT and 156/QĐ-BY<sup>1</sup> as guidelines to protect the population and prevent the spread of the new virus. During January 2020, Vietnam's Ministry of Health sent eight dispatches to local governments, hospitals, and health departments stressing the importance of early new virus treatment and prevention.

Vietnam started with a strict screening of passengers from China at its airports, seaports, and land crossings, followed by isolating passengers suspected of infection, and entirely restricting flights to Wuhan and other affected areas in China. Since Feb 3, 2020, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc ordered a quarantine of all travelers from or transiting through the novel coronavirus-affected areas. They were to be immediately held at the health center in the province or city they arrived in. Since the first period of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Vietnamese government exercised a comprehensive responsibility and collaboration among ministries, agencies, and localities to ensure the highest accountability.

It could be said that the pandemic was an opportunity for technologies involved in the digital transformation of Vietnam to adapt to the COVID-19 reality. Accordingly, on March 10, 2020, the Ministry of Health website and 2 free apps, named "NCOVI" and "BLUEZONE," had been designed by the Ministry of Information and Communication along with the Ministry of Health and were available both on Google Play and at Apple stores. The Vietnamese government suggested that all citizens and foreigners arriving in Vietnam download this app as well as the contact numbers of the Ministry of Health in order to check data and receive guidance on prevention. Additionally, Deputy Prime Minister Vu Duc Dam, head of the National Steering Committee on COVID-19 Prevention and Control, encouraged them to work along with medical authorities by filling out online health declaration forms<sup>2</sup>.

With the aim of preventing the pandemic, temporary hospitals were set up in provinces near the two biggest airports (Noi Bai and Tan San Nhat airports). Officially, under Document No. 4995/BYT-DP<sup>3</sup> since March 21, 2020, Vietnam announced a 14-day mandatory quarantine from their arrival date for all passengers

1 <https://kcb.vn/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/qdb-2020-125-1-2.pdf>

2 <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/health-declaration-apps-to-aid-vietnam-s-coronavirus-campaign-4067058.html>

3 <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/cong-van/The-thao-Y-te/Official-Dispatch-4995-BYT-DP-2020-temporary-guidance-on-supervision-of-people-entering-Vietnam-453540.aspx>

from all countries and regions including Vietnamese passengers holding diplomatic or official passports or guaranteed by their nation's embassies. After 14 days, they were required to practice self-isolation at home, strictly implement measures for medical supervision and pandemic prevention, avoid contact with people in the community, and immediately notify health authorities if they showed symptoms of the disease.

What did foreigners think about the quarantine? Gavin Wheelson is a British citizen who had an unforgettable experience at his temporary residence in Son Tay beginning on March 14 after he arrived in Hanoi from London. For a couple of weeks, he experienced support from Vietnamese doctors, volunteers, and translators. "They live here to help their country and despite what they might have heard, they're friendly and caring. So far, this feels more like a holiday camp than a quarantine" (Wheelson, 2020).<sup>4</sup>

Between April 15 and November 5, 2020, the Ministries of Health, Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade organized more than 200 repatriation flights with the mission of bringing 60,000 Vietnamese home from over 50 countries and territories. The Vietnamese government charged all of them quarantine fees, and medical treatments had to be paid for by the patient, in case they were positive with the virus.

In the second stage, being aware of the pandemic danger, the Ministry of Health, working along with the Ministries of Public Security and Defence, urged local authorities to closely monitor border crossings, and keep a close eye on people entering Vietnam, especially in the industrial zones and seaports.<sup>5</sup> Everyone found to be involved in illegal movements across the border would be compulsorily isolated and subject to imposed restrictions. On April 1, a 15-day nationwide social distancing period was approved under the Directive No. 16/ CT-TTg.<sup>6</sup> According to it, all citizens were required to "shelter in place," non-essential businesses and schools were shut down, and people were asked to not go out unless for basic necessities such as buying food or drugs. Despite the fact that this policy was a cause of great inconvenience to many, most Vietnamese were willing to follow

4 <https://southeastasiaglobe.com/coronavirus-life-inside-a-vietnamese-government-quarantine/>

5 <https://vietnamnews.vn/society/770986/border-guard-force-plays-key-role-in-COVID-19-prevention-deputy-pm.html>

6 <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/The-thao-Y-te/Directive-16-CT-TTg-2020-implementation-of-urgent-measures-for-prevention-and-control-of-COVID-19-438660.aspx>

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the government's regulations. By having social distancing and dividing all localities of the country into "high-risk" and "low-risk" zones, the number of cases was limited significantly following this period, which is considered a milestone in the prevention of disease transmission in Vietnam.

On March 3, 2020, Vietnam became one of the few countries to have officially manufactured virus test kits, by virtue of the around-the-clock work of Vietnam's Institute of Biotechnology, part of its Academy of Science and Technology, under the direction of Associate Professor Dinh Duy Khang.<sup>7</sup> After being approved by the WHO, Vietnam was able to manufacture 10,000 kits per day and export them to many Western countries.<sup>8</sup>

### **'Teach and Tech': Blueprints for the Future of Vietnamese Education**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on education and training globally. As estimated by the International Labour Organization (ILO), over 70% of teenagers globally were suffering from, or negatively impacted by, school disruptions.<sup>9</sup> While 65% of the students in high-middle income countries had the capability to use technology such as a laptop and the Internet for online study, only 18% of those in low-to-middle income countries could access this new studying model.

After the 2020 Lunar New Year holiday, Vietnam was faced with the first wave of the pandemic. Immediately, the Ministries of Health and that of Education and Training announced the closing of all schools in Vietnam's 63 provinces and its more than 200 universities, in order to avoid spreading the COVID-19 virus. The closing of schools significantly disrupted students' studying and examination plans. Hundreds of English centers and private schools were closed and some of them went bankrupt. However, the experiences of this period demonstrated that digitalization in education would be a potential growth sector in the next 10 years with the new 'digital' generation.

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7 <https://en.nhandan.org.vn/society/health/item/8459902-vietnam-successfully-produces-sars-cov-2-test-kit.html>

8 <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/who-approves-made-in-vietnam-COVID-19-test-kit-4090402.html>

9 [https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS\\_753060/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_753060/lang--en/index.htm)

It is estimated that 80 percent of Vietnamese students have the opportunity for e-learning, and Vietnam is ranked 17th among 200 countries that adapted to the pandemic by digitalizing education. With the goal of “continuing learning despite school closures,” distance learning has proved to be effective from the early stages.<sup>10</sup> The Ministry of Education and Training has been working to finalize the guidelines introducing user requirements, tools, and methods for teaching and training in the format of documents and video clips. Many schools in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Haiphong, and elsewhere have proactively organized training classes including use of Zoom, Google meeting, Quizz and Zalo for course design, course development, delivery, e-learning, and class evaluations for teachers, and have worked with technology companies to implement distance learning as soon as possible. In addition, the Minister of Training and Education Phung Xuan Nha has required teachers to enrich learning and teaching materials for television,<sup>11</sup> emphasizing it as an important tool to retain the quality of studying for all students nationwide.

In contrast to the traditional classes that had previously remained, distance learning is brand new. However, in Vietnam education was adapted in time to survive during the COVID pandemic. According to UNICEF Vietnam, at Trung Chai Ethnic Secondary School in Northern Vietnam, only 3% of the students could learn online via e-learning platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet.<sup>12</sup> With the slogan, “No one left behind,” the Ministry of Education and Training streamlined new assignments and syllabuses, improved its Internet capability, sent study documents via the post office to mountainous areas where the equitable access to the Internet had not yet been achieved, where the students and their families and teachers do not have devices, and are unable to access this kind of online learning.

Knowing that the digital divide equals a learning divide, one that will only grow as education will increasingly require children to have digital skills and literacy, the Ministry of Education and Training collaborates with Ministry of Information and Communication to promote technological applications by operating an online training system and website named [viettelstudy.vn](http://viettelstudy.vn), which was provided

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10 <https://www.unicef.org/vietnam/stories/minister-education-and-training-phung-xuan-nha-requests-unicefs-support-distance-learning>

11 <https://www.unicef.org/vietnam/stories/minister-education-and-training-phung-xuan-nha-requests-unicefs-support-distance-learning>

12 <https://www.unicef.org/vietnam/stories/ethnic-minority-education-viet-nam-challenges-and-opportunities-during-COVID-19-outbreak>



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by Viettel, a military and telecom provider is the first and only e-learning platform in Southeast Asia. The Ministry of Information and Communication collaborated with Viettel to ensure at-home Internet access, providing free Internet data for all Vietnamese children from cities to provinces and mountainous areas, for comprehensive educational access.

However, this pandemic could be seen as provoking a shift to digital transition opportunities for Vietnamese EdTech. With this proactive approach and working around the clock, on the part of people at both the Ministry of Training and Education and that of Information and Communication, and of government at all levels, national and local, both distance learning and the EdTech sector in the Vietnamese market may well receive huge investments in the next few decades.

### **Economic stability**

“Gloomy” is the general picture of the world’s economy in this period. The pandemic infected millions and brought economic activities to a near-standstill. According to *Global Economic Prospects* in June 2020, despite the extraordinary efforts of many governments, the baseline forecast envisioned a 5.2% contraction in global GDP in 2020. Peru is one country that suffered heavily from the pandemic, as its economy fell 30% in 2020;<sup>13</sup> the output of the economy in the second quarter in Spain and Tunisia was more than 20% smaller than that of the previous year.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, Vietnam has managed successfully to limit the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak so far, though its economy has suffered in recent months. According to the General Statistics Office of Vietnam, Vietnam’s GDP in the fourth quarter of 2020 increased 4.48% over the same period last year, the lowest increase among those for each year in the period 2010-2020.<sup>15</sup> Tourism and the electronics trade are the most vulnerable sectors, with one-third of foreigners visiting Vietnam being from China, and the number of international visitors to Vietnam dropping from 20 million to 3.8 million in 2020, a low last seen in 2006.<sup>16</sup> With the help of lessons learned from the SARS pandemic in

13 <https://www.spglobal.com/marketintelligence/en/news-insights/latest-news-headlines/peru-enters-technical-recession-as-q2-gdp-falls-30-2-60033208>

14 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/global-economic-prospects>

15 <https://www.gso.gov.vn/en/data-and-statistics/2021/01/socio-economic-situation-in-the-fourth-quarter-and-the-whole-year-2020/>

16 <https://www.gso.gov.vn/en/data-and-statistics/2020/12/overcoming-the-difficulties-of-the-COVID-19-epidemic-viet-nam-tourism-won-top-regional-and-world-awards-in-2020/>

2003, the direction and administration from the top-down Vietnamese government, the Prime Minister, and collaboration among the ministries enabled the timely recovery of the economy.

Supporting private firms, small and medium size industries are the highest priority of the Vietnamese government for recovery in the economy not only in the period of social distancing but also after the COVID-19 outbreak. On May 29, 2020, the government published Resolution 84/NQ-CP,<sup>17</sup> unveiling a number of incentives for businesses affected by the pandemic. A series of commercial banks have launched credit packages on preferential loans. The State Bank of Vietnam along with commercial banks such as Vietcombank, BIDV, and TP Bank crafted a circular that would support credit organizations in restructuring debt payment deadlines and adjusting the borrowing interest rate. Statistics show that more than 44,000 customers, with a total debt of 222 billion Vietnamese dong, benefitted from this resolution.<sup>18</sup> During the third period of this pandemic, when the Vietnamese lunar New Year was coming, the Government immediately extended the corporate income tax, which was estimated at over 68,800 billion VND for 5 months in 2021.<sup>19</sup> This proposal was expected to provide SMEs with a considerable tax break, allowing them to expand their business scale, and resulting in a more substantial contribution to the state budget. In terms of the automobile industry, the government in 2020 reduced vehicle registration fees by 50% until the end of the year.<sup>20</sup> In addition, Vietnam's national trade union, the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (VGCL), also supports workers who have been affected by the pandemic and natural disasters in 2020, with up to VND 1-2 million (US\$43-86) each for the Vietnamese New Year Holiday, which began on February 12.

In term of economic integration, the Ministry of Labour, Invalids, and Social Affairs (MOLISA) has allowed foreign experts, company managers, and high-tech workers to enter Vietnam while ensuring compliance with pandemic prevention.

17 <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/doanh-nghiep/Resolution-84-NQ-CP-2020-dealing-with-difficulties-in-business-operations-during-COVID-19-epidemic-445005.aspx>

18 <http://news.chinhphu.vn/Home/State-Bank-cuts-interest-rates-to-support-businesses-amidst-COVID19-outbreak/20203/39231.vgp>

19 <https://dantri.com.vn/kinh-doanh/COVID-19-bung-phat-doanh-nghiep-duoc-gia-han-thue-khung-gan-5-ty-usd-20210207114449748.htm>

20 <https://dantri.com.vn/kinh-doanh/COVID-19-bung-phat-doanh-nghiep-duoc-gia-han-thue-khung-gan-5-ty-usd-20210207114449748.htm>

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In August 2020, The EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA) was signed, opening up a new chapter for Vietnam-EU integration in global value chains in the aftermath of COVID19. Reducing tariffs would be the priority of this agreement, which strengthens linkages between Vietnamese and EU companies in the post-COVID-19 context. According to Dr. Vu Tien Loc, President of the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry: “The agreement has opened up a ‘high-way to Europe’ for Vietnamese businesses. However, the EVFTA has brought not only opportunities but also challenges, by putting local companies in the same arena with giants. Overcoming these great challenges will lay a solid foundation for the development of Vietnamese businesses in the current highly competitive integration context” (Loc, 2020).<sup>21</sup>

Under the unexpected pandemic, tourism has been the most damaged sector internationally, including in Vietnam. It is estimated that the total revenue from tourism decreased by 47.4% to \$6.5 billion.

To deal with this situation, the Ministry of Culture, Sport, and Tourism made the timely decision of reducing the current prices of traveling, accommodation, and other additional services; therefore, domestic tourism has become the top choice in the post-COVID-19 era. The 30-second video, “Why not Vietnam?”<sup>22</sup> on CNN introduces views of people in the country from north to south; it was produced by the Tourism Advisory Board, the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, along with CNN. Applying 4.0 technology post-COVID-19, the app “Vietnam travel safety” was designed for, and operated in, both IOS and Android systems, and was rolled out on October 10.<sup>23</sup> This platform could support visitors in updating safety standards in the COVID-19 situation, checking information facilities and promotion programs along 63 providers and cities in Vietnam.

The Vietnamese economy, despite the pandemic, is projected to grow by more than 7.5 percent in 2021 (Fitch Rating, 202).<sup>24</sup> Another factor that contributes to Vietnam's economic growth are the foreign investors in major companies such

21 <http://news.chinhphu.vn/Home/State-Bank-cuts-interest-rates-to-support-businesses-amidst-COVID19-outbreak/20203/39231.vgp>

22 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9a-IeDh8vU4>

23 <https://vietnamtimes.org.vn/vietnam-to-launch-vietnam-travel-safety-app-amidst-COVID-19-pandemic-25098.html>

24 <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/business/economy/vietnam-growth-prospects-endure-despite-new-COVID-19-outbreak-fitch-ratings-4238480.html>

a Samsung, LG, Panasonic, which show signs of expanding their presence in Vietnam. Vietnam will surely continue to focus on inclusive growth, by boosting international economic comprehensive, and its human capital, as well as enhancing governmental coordination, identifying long- and short-time strategic plans, to drives Vietnam toward its goal of becoming a high-income economy by 2045 despite the continuing challenge of the pandemic at this time.

### Technology and Communication

One of the things that has made Vietnam a tiny hero in this pandemic is the broad solidarity and reliance on the power of communication across the nation's governments in the national, regional, and local levels.

At the start of the pandemic, most online discussions in Vietnamese focused on the spread and danger of the disease. The government employed slogans such as, "Wear masks, wash hands regularly, take care of the environment in order to protect yourself and the community," and "If you are a patriot, just stay home." Such slogans and related information have been vertically communicated on all kinds of social media (including TV channels, public loudspeaker systems, newspapers, and Facebook) as a warning sign to all citizens, from the big cities to the countryside. Poetry and music were unique ways in which the Vietnamese government tried to mobilize people. The song "Ghen Co Vy,"<sup>25</sup> which is about hand-washing to prevent COVID-19 infection, went viral on not only domestic but also global social networks.<sup>26</sup> It was translated into an English version and has crossed the border to reach other countries such as the U.S. and France. Many Vietnamese influencers have also actively used social media like Instagram and TikTok to develop their own stories about the quarantine period and give positive energy to other people during the pandemic.<sup>27</sup>

Zalo is a Vietnamese free message and call mobile app launched in 2012, with 46.5 million users. During the campaign, Zalo has been working with the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Information and Communication to send messages of pandemic hot news, the numbers of positive cases, health protection

25 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BtUL3oArQw>

26 <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/life/culture/vietnam-s-coronavirus-song-goes-viral-again-with-american-cover-version-4069458.html>

27 <https://tuoitrenews.vn/news/lifestyle/20200317/vietnamese-influencer-praised-for-optimism-during-COVID19-quarantine/53515.html>

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instructions, and other information every morning. Moreover, the Zalo account can integrate by linking to <http://ncov.moh.gov.vn> and the “Health Declaration” website, mapping the closest areas of concentration and isolation.<sup>28</sup>

The bus mask that was launched in Ho Chi Minh city was a new idea of Pham Quang Anh, director of the Ho Chi Minh-based Dony International Joint Stock Company.<sup>29</sup> This bus carried the message, “Wear a mask: Have a safe Tet holiday,” and gave away face masks and offered hand lotion to mostly low-income people. There was also a loudspeaker on the top of the bus used for messages that promote preventive measures. On the other hand, the rice ATM invented in Ho Chi Minh City has inspired nationwide support for the poor to survive the pandemic.<sup>30</sup> This unique design was firstly set up in District 12, and similar machines then sprouted in Hanoi and other cities, including Binh Thuan, Dak Lak, and Ca Mau, with the aim of dispensing 500 kilograms of rice per day for the poor who were heavily affected by the pandemic.<sup>31</sup> These two innovations are examples of collaborations between individuals, communities, and local authorities to response to the pandemic.

Overall, central to all the communicative slogans that have been employed is the importance of togetherness and cooperation between those in the frontline and those in the rear, as a precondition of achieving success against the virus. In the new decade, in terms of technology and information, Vietnam adapted the lessons learned from the experience of the SARS epidemic by mixing traditional information channels and diversifying all medical and social platforms into the campaign against COVID-19.

## Conclusion

First of all, the immediate and proactive actions of Vietnam’s government at all levels, as well as close coordination between its government and citizens, are the key factors that have contributed to effective responses to the post COVID-19

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28 <https://sggpnews.org.vn/hochiminhcity/COVID-19-official-information-provided-on-zalo-86060.html>

29 <https://tuoitrenews.vn/news/society/20210208/ho-chi-minh-city-bus-releases-face-masks-for-free/59199.html>

30 <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/13/world/coronavirus-vietnam-rice-atm-trnd/index.html>

31 <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/life/trend/rice-atms-dispense-hope-to-vietnam-s-poor-4084369.html>

pandemic in Vietnam up to now. Recently, in this sensitive situation, with the upcoming Lunar New Year holiday and the election of the National Congress, the Ministry of Health has called for tighter measures to prevent the spread of COVID and focus on strict management of the citizens/workers movement. As of this writing, Vietnam has 2053 cases, mostly in Hanoi, Hai Duong and Ho Chi Minh City. The government is working around clock during Tet and, as Deputy Prime Minister Vu Duc Dam has said, “All forces have to try to keep our promise to quell the new wave within 10 days.”

By the end of February 2020, Vietnam could receive five million COVID vaccines as the first shot for people in the frontline of pandemic, and the second shot may be available in the next three months. Prime Minister Truong Hoa Binh said the supply of vaccines is not enough for all Vietnamese citizens; therefore, authorities actively negotiated with other sources to buy more vaccines as well as to promote homemade vaccine manufacturing. According to Deputy Ministry of Health Truong Quoc Cuong, Vietnam reached an agreement for 30 million shots from UK-based vaccine producer AstraZeneca for 15 million people between the first and fourth quarters of 2021, with the contribution of the Vietnam Vaccine Joint Stock Company, the biggest private vaccination system in Vietnam.<sup>32</sup> The US, Russia, and the European Union are also Vietnam’s comprehensive vaccine partners. However, what stands in the way now is that the EU is limiting the export of vaccines; thus, the government has stepped up negotiations. In addition, Vietnam’s goal of “Tiem chung dai tra” means that everyone in the country may be able to access the vaccine by mid-2021. Now, Vietnam is calling for 60 volunteers to be injected with the domestically-produced vaccine named Nanocovax.<sup>33</sup>

The pandemic is still happening, and the situation continues to change rapidly. It is worth noting that Vietnam has had remarkable success in curbing the spreading of the disease. The three pillars of government, the private sector, and communities, have contributed in a major way to the situation of Vietnam, have responded quickly to the crisis, recovered, and kept growing socially and economically. This article has reported on how Vietnam’s influential political systems, leadership, and experienced official teams were proactive in implementing

32 <http://news.chinhphu.vn/Home/VN-to-buy-30-million-doses-of-UKs-COVID19-vaccine/2021/42586.vgp>

33 <https://vietnaminsider.vn/heres-what-we-know-about-vietnams-homemade-COVID-vaccine/>

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rigorous strategies to address the emerging outbreak, and the most importance factor that has contributed to this process is the traditional Vietnamese national unity, which has guided the nation through a thousand years of resilient history.

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# 5

## STATE, NEOLIBERALISM AND COVID-19 IN BANGLADESH

*Najaha Choudhury*

### **Abstract**

Bangladesh was one of the initial countries that the neoliberal market model was used for as a strategy for development. The World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) saw Bangladesh as success story for other countries in the Third World to follow. In this model, state intervention was identified as counterproductive and inefficient in the Third World in general, and specifically in Bangladesh. However, with the emergence of COVID-19, the state's role has become fundamental. This article investigates the Bangladeshi state attempt to contain the outbreak of COVID-19. It will assess the role of state in implementing different measures employed including social distancing, and diplomacy with India and China, to manage the pandemic.

### **Introduction**

The Bangladeshi economy was liberalised through the introduction of a series of market-led reforms in the 1970s. Bangladesh has been credited with carrying out the liberal reforms successfully, implementing a structural adjustment programme (SAP) since 1982. The key policy instruments of SAPs aim to reduce the role of the state in the economy. This has involved reducing tariff rationalisation, trade liberalisation, price decontrol, and reducing government subsidies. The speed with which the reform was implemented has been faster than in any other country in South Asia (Nuruzzaman, 2004).

As the COVID-19 outbreak surged worldwide, countries adopted different preventative measures to counter its impact on its population. Bangladesh's government, under considerable pressure and against its wishes, had to take action to manage the pandemic. Through imposed travel bans, the government demanded that its population use remote activities, a nation-wide lockdown, and



most importantly social distancing. Bangladesh faced many challenges including having one of the world's densest populations, at nearly 170 million; Dhaka, the capital, has a population of 9 million. In addition, there are some 1.1 million slum dwellers, and over a million Rohingya refugees, most of whom are living in close quarters in refugee camps and have had many casualties.

The impact of COVID-19 has been steady, with about 798,830 cases and a death total of 12,583 (World Health Organisation) as of May 19, 2021. The government managed to react promptly, and with the emphatic collaboration of its population and international assistance, has managed to achieve a relative control of COVID-19 within the nation's borders. The government's approach has been to constantly use media to inform and support its population in dealing with COVID-19. Despite the increasing number of cases, the country's economy has remained strong and continued to grow, although the lockdowns are likely to have an impact on Bangladesh's GDP growth, which is projected to be 6.8 percent for 2020-21.

This article is an attempt to assess how Bangladesh's state had managed COVID-19.

Given that Bangladesh has been one of the success stories of neoliberal globalisation, the state's role in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic is important, as it has had to intervene in the economy. The article will focus on why and how the state has intervened, and its capacity to enforce a policy of lockdown. While Bangladesh has experienced healthy economic growth in recent years, the state tolerated much lockdown rule-breaking, conceding that the immediate livelihood needs of the poor masses overrode national public health concerns.

### **The state, the market, and neoliberalism**

The state is more than a government: it is a body that has overall control of a nation's geographical boundaries, military and police force, and media. The state has the capacity to penetrate civil society, using force to ensure order across its territories. Its means include tax assessment and collection from its citizens. With respect to COVID-19, it manages the provision of basic services such as health and social care, subsistence needs, and employment and social assistance where necessary. The state also must ensure that the country has an adequate infrastructural capacity that can coordinate the activities of civil society, including bureaucratic oversight agencies.

Since the 1980s, under the neoliberal globalisation of states in the Third world countries in Africa, Latin, Central American, Asia, and the Middle East required by the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF), states were expected to diminish their role in their country's economy. The increasing marginalization of the state in a globalized world was considered the only way for development to ensue, in the Third World in general and specifically in Bangladesh. The market became the central institution in the neoliberal vision. This restoration of market pre-eminence and its internationalization presented market capitalism, or the generalized use of commodities, as the optimal strategy for economic progress and efficiency.

Bangladesh had been forced to follow a similar strategy, as the WB and IMF reforms targeted nations like Bangladesh in requiring them to follow the structural adjustment programs (SAPs). They imposed fiscal discipline, the cutting of public expenditure, tax reform, liberalized interest rates, floating exchange rates, free trade, foreign direct investment, privatization, and deregulation (Easterly, 2005). Bangladesh was seen as a model and success story for other Third World countries to follow. In the name of removing corruption, improving efficiency and transparency, increasing employment, and reducing poverty, the country had to go through such a process of reform. The World Bank has focused on poverty-alleviation programs in Bangladesh, hoping this would bring about a "trickle down" impact on development. Neoliberalism, with the declining role of the state, provided the conditions favourable for the emergence and growth of numerous non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and the country became the most important case study for many scholars debating and discussing its success. Bangladesh became one of the leading for countries to integrate NGOs into different sectors of the economy while aiming to reduce poverty.

These reforms, instead, increased the scope and legality of corruption, criminality, resource grabbing, commissions from bad deals, and gangsterism. This process of capital accumulation is in many ways similar to other countries, including in Europe, where historically elites appropriated common resources and turned them into private property. In Bangladesh, neoliberal programs and the model of primitive capital accumulation work as twins: they help each other, rationalize each other, and strengthen each other. The results have been contrasting, with economic growth reaching over 5 per cent, but there is also growing bribery, crime, an arms trade, corruption, and trafficking of women. The state, however, has not

withered away; it played an important role in providing adequate facilities for the capitalist class to accumulate and increase its profits.

When the pandemic started in Bangladesh, the state had very little choice but to intervene. The Bangladeshi state, in the early part of the pandemic, decided to end the lockdown it had at first imposed, and related policies, even though it had the coercive capacity to enforce them. Although the government appeared to call for social distancing, it could not impose it. For the country, which does not have solid health policy and legislative structures to combat a pandemic, this was a huge risk to take. The initial strategic planning was a reactive approach, so the state worked on the public perception of comparative lockdowns. The government, however, had to be aware of the humanitarian crisis that could arise as a result of food shortages, resulting possibly in a worsening of the crisis. Hence, the state had to take seriously the possibility of unemployment, economic and financial instability, famine, and social conflict.

### **Managing COVID-19 in Bangladesh**

The spread of COVID-19 in Bangladesh became clear as early as March 2020, and it soon became the third most affected country in South Asia, after India and Pakistan. The Bangladeshi government since implemented a series of measures to contain the spread of the virus. These included regional and national lockdowns, closing schools, 'all government and private offices', and 'increas[ing] public awareness and enforc[ing] social distancing' (Islam, 2020) through the use of technology, including televised messages to wear masks. The Bangladeshi state was able to convince its citizens of the importance of abiding by the lockdowns and the need to stay social distanced, without the requirement of using the police to enforce strict regulations on citizens. This convincing of citizens through digital speeches meant less resistance and citizens voluntarily staying isolated in fear of the virus, while also providing knowledge about the insufficient healthcare system.

The national lockdown was implemented from March 26 to May 30, 2020. However, social distancing was challenging, as the average Bangladeshi household consists of three generations, making it difficult to separate working adults and children from the more vulnerable elderly. Other measures included suspending all international and domestic flights; also, rail, water, and air travel were suspended and public transport banned during this time period. Bangladeshis would take

the risk, as the need to work and obtain money in order to provide for themselves and their families overrode the priority to protect their health. By shutting down public transport, the state chose to force individuals into not working, as it is known that many of the working-class citizens require the use of public transport in order to get to work, especially in the city. However, with public transport closed, the government knew that this would coerce individuals into staying home and being isolated.

The government closed schools. These closures were extended and 'continued to rely on remote learning'; however, many individuals cannot afford to buy technology in order to access remote learning, consequently hindering their education; and 60% of those who have access to it have a poor 'quality of broadband internet' (Menon, 2020). The government also implemented a border lockdown with India, due to the rising number of cases, and this affected the investments in Bangladesh coming from Indian companies. Also, pre-pandemic China was the country with the highest foreign direct investment in Bangladesh, and this has slowed, impacting Bangladesh's economy and development. Bangladesh is continuing to have district lockdowns in areas with increasing risks, including Satkhira, which underwent a '7-day lockdown' beginning June 5, 2021, as the daily infection rate has increased (dhakatribune.com, 2021).

By Bangladesh's government choosing to intercept the normal flows of the free market, and imposing restrictions on citizens' actions that arguably are their fundamental rights, in an attempt to contain the spread, they have interrupted the neoliberal order of the country. Bangladesh's government also used COVID-19 as a pretext for tightening the pressure on its political opposition. While the public was busy concentrating on its own health issues, authoritarian leaders launched new assaults against opposition groups. The government detained activists and journalists who had criticised official responses to the coronavirus. In Bangladesh, extreme pressure and detentions have been used against political opponents. The state imposed fines and imprisoned those who spread 'fake news' critical of official management of the pandemic, and press freedom essentially became controlled by the government. The authorities under the draconian Digital Security Act 'apparently arrested at least a dozen people including' Dr. Iftekhar Adnan, as well as many 'opposition activists and students'. Also, 'two government college teachers were allegedly suspended' for 'misconduct' under the Government Servants (Discipline and Appeal) Rules, 2018 (hrw.org, 2020). The Information Ministry

also announced, on March 26, 2020, that ‘it has formed a unit to monitor social media and various television outlets for “rumours” about COVID-19 cases’, by assigning officials to monitor them (hrw.org, 2020). The government has essentially silenced individuals by stifling their right to exercise free speech, especially with regard to their concerns or reality of COVID-19 within the country.

Bangladesh is a third world country. It has one of the fastest growing economies in the world; despite this, much of the acquired capital is invested back into the textile and manufacturing sectors. Sectors such as healthcare have gotten better over time, but are nowhere near the level needed to challenge COVID-19, and this is compounded by the fact that Bangladesh has densely populated cities. For the many individuals living in slums, this has not helped sustain the outbreak, as people cannot properly isolate when living so closely packed together, resulting in the lockdown not being as efficient as previously hoped. Severe community transfer was one of the biggest concerns of the Bangladeshi government and its healthcare workers, since Bangladesh has many vulnerable individuals including refugees. Bangladesh overall has been noted for poor governance due to corruption and disorderliness; however, the resilience of the people has helped Bangladesh in many situations.

Despite the Bengali citizens for the most part being compliant with the new imposed regulations and social distancing rules, the country struggled as the ‘health care systems of Bangladesh were not prepared to face this’, and ‘molecular diagnostic procedure against any infectious disease is very limited in Bangladesh’ (T. Islam, 2020). Bangladesh has a lack of skilled human resources, limited treatment facilities, a limited number of tests, a lack of safety equipment and ventilators, a lack of research funds, and large numbers of Rohingya refugees who are also now at risk. By the citizens obeying social distancing rules, they are helping prevent further spread, and slowing the process down. Yet, ultimately the virus needs to be responded to through vaccinations, and more aid through medical supplies in order to fully discontinue.

Among Bangladeshi working individuals, young professionals are the group that is most often infected by the virus; ‘68 per cent of COVID-19 positive cases were observed in people aged 21–50 years’ (T. Islam, 2020). Despite an unusually large number of younger individuals being infected, Bangladesh has a lower recovery rate, due to its limited healthcare services. This demonstrates that despite the

population obeying the rules and the government implementing necessary measures, money is really an underlying determining factor in how well a country can recover from situations like the COVID-19 pandemic. Communist China was able to have its population abide by measures through aggressive policies, including 'officials going door to door for health checks, and forcing anyone ill into isolation'; guards and drones were monitoring citizens, and some areas 'barred residents from leaving' (theguardian.com, 2020). Bangladesh's government, on the other hand, did not need to implement aggressive policies, and yet many citizens are suffering or not recovering due to the inadequate health services, and the lack of coordination between the different healthcare departments.

As Bangladesh's economy was impacted by the pandemic, the decisions made by the government contributed to this; for example, the state intervened in the economy, and took the decision to close down factories. Rubana Huq, the president of Bangladesh Manufacturers and Exporters Association, stated that "most factories are closed now except ones making PPE. Lockdown is being taken very seriously" (Glover, 2020). The state's intervention into the economy came from the tightening of lockdown rules in order to prevent the spread of COVID, as factories generally consist of many individuals working while closely packed together. Factories being closed temporarily have affected the rate of manufactured goods and exports, effectively hurting the economy, as well as companies cancelling orders of 'nearly 650 million garments', which resulted in a loss 'worth a total of US\$2.04 billion'. This negatively impacted over '738 factories', and with the garments sector providing 80% of Bangladesh' exports, the consequences of the pandemic have hurt over '1.42 million workers', especially women who had obtained mobility through this garment sector (Glover, 2020).

The state intervention in the country, including with the closing of shops and factories, has affected the flow of the market even more, as the economic crisis has negatively impacted daily wage earners. The use of microcredits has helped individuals who were more financially disadvantaged to become self-sufficient, and to maintain their livelihood during the pandemic. Informal activities, including 'rural nonfarm' and 'construction work', are supported by the microfinance sector, whose 'microfinance institutions (MFIs) are working to support the activities of their customers' (Mujeri, 2020). Despite the effects of the pandemic, resulting in lockdowns and closings of businesses, shops, and factories, Bangladesh has macroeconomic stability, and the country's 'exports, remittance performance

and the resilience of the private sector in its economy have aided the country's growth' during the on-going pandemic (Ethiraj 2020).

Under huge political pressure, the government 'announced several financial stimulus packages of about USD 11.90 billion' (Islam, 2020), to help the poor and those put out of work due to the pandemic. It also the 'deployment of the law enforcement agencies including army and police to ensure' that social distancing is maintained and encouraged. Many celebrations were cancelled, including Bangladesh's 50<sup>th</sup> Independence Day, the Bangla New Year on April 14, and 'the grand inauguration ceremony of the father of the nation', Sheikh Mujibur. The program 'Rice for TK, 10 per KG (approx. 12 cents/kg rice)' was operated for the poor during the pandemic to help them acquire food, as well as donations of money and food being given by people at the top of society (Islam, 2020). Government has been praised for encouraging 'all non-essential businesses to go online' and harnessing 'tech, [and] installing screening devices across international airports which screened some 650,000 people (of which 37,000 were immediately quarantined)' (dhakatribune.com, 2020).

Vaccines have reached Bangladesh, and doses are currently being given out to citizens, having administered '9,904,532 vaccine doses' (covid19.who.int) as of May 2021. 'Bangladesh holds the 11<sup>th</sup> position in the global vaccination race--ahead of Spain, Poland and Canada' (Hassan, 2021). 'Through Beximco Pharmaceuticals, Bangladesh has secured priority contracts for 30 million doses from the Serum Institute of India (SII)'. This allowed the successful rollout of vaccines. Bangladesh was also able to obtain '2 million more doses as a "gift" from India' due to Bangladesh's diplomatic relationship with India (Hassan, 2021). Overall, 'Bangladesh's early-stage rollout has been an administrative success', and despite the poor governance and disorderliness of the government in certain sectors of Bangladesh, the resilience of the people, and the effectiveness of the vaccine rollout, has made Bangladesh a success story in South Asia in its fight against COVID-19.

## Conclusion

Since the 1980s, Bangladesh's economy has gone through a neoliberal strategy, implementing a structural adjustment programme, and market relations have become dominant. Undoubtedly, the income through remittances from abroad, on the part of those Bangladeshi who are working in other countries, has been the

major source for the state. The spread of microcredit has also played a role in increasing the market orientation of the economy. Small trade and small money-lenders grew because of both remittances and microcredit. The much-applauded rise in women's mobility came more from garment production than microcredit. The state investment in developing infrastructure like roads and electrification has opened up opportunities for different occupations, businesses, and short-term migration. With the outbreak of COVID-19, the situation has changed, with a decline of remittance inflow in a pandemic-affected year, when it was often more needed than ever. The World Bank predicted that the amount of money migrant workers transferred to Bangladesh would decline by 14 per cent.

Despite this, Bangladesh has effectively managed the COVID-19 outbreak within the country, relatively successfully for a south Asian country whose healthcare system was not matched to the increasing severity of the pandemic. Bangladesh has effectively controlled the outbreak through its rollout of the vaccines, and the social distancing measures and policies implemented to slow its spread, as well as the obedience of most of the society. The comparison between China and Bangladesh showcases the nation's differences; both countries implemented measures through differing political parties and frameworks, but China was more capable of containing the spread, and not as affected economically, due to its advanced healthcare, diversification in its healthcare sector, and its ability to enforce strict regulations and policies, as a Communist state. Bangladesh, contrastingly, was able to have its citizens comply and control the spread through digital means, and educating the citizens on why different measures are being implemented, and on the importance of vaccinations for returning to normalcy.

Overall, the state has intervened in many ways in Bangladesh during the pandemic, including in the economic sector, education, and public services. This has resulted in the prevention of the citizens from carrying out activities in their routine that are essential, including work; however, this was in an attempt to control the outbreak of COVID. The state also intervened in the media sector, but instead of declining misinformation or 'propaganda' on the virus, the state instead chose to silence individuals using the media to convey their critical perceptions of the government's response to COVID or who might be inclined to comment if there were an increase in cases. The state was able to use its power in different ways during the pandemic that would not have been achievable under the neo-liberal model the country was following pre-pandemic.



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PART **II**

**NON-DEMOCRATIC RESPONSES TO  
COVID-19**



# 6

## HAS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ALLOWED THE UK TO MOVE TOWARDS MORE AUTHORITARIAN PRACTICES?

*Kate Vasiljeva*

### **Abstract**

COVID-19 has brought a diverse range of challenges to governments across the globe since its emergence in 2019. The management of the global health crisis has served as a catalyst for some supposedly democratic states to engage in more authoritarian practices. By analysing the prevalence of these practices in the context of the United Kingdom, this paper has found that these existed pre-COVID-19. However, renewed attention to and use of them by the government have been on the rise during the global pandemic. This paper examines some of the key authoritarian practices enacted by the UK government, including increased mass surveillance, the undermining of democracy and civil liberties, and the suppression of information, all during the time of the pandemic. The paper finds that with the rise of these practices, a more authoritarian style of governance has been engaged in by the government, which sets a dangerous precedent for the future of democracy in the UK.

### **Introduction**

COVID-19, a disease that was, first, a distant and foreign idea to people in the UK, spread like a blanket into almost every corner of the world since its first emergence in 2019 in Wuhan, China, and since became a global emergency (Duarte 2020; Page, Hinshaw, & McKay, 2021). In the wake of this crisis, issues already prevalent in the world have only picked up their pace, and new problems have also emerged as a result. In particular, issues of democracy and freedom have been hit hard by the pandemic, adding to the existing decline of both for the last 15 years pre-COVID (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2021). It is for this reason

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that this paper will focus on these issues in the context of the United Kingdom (UK). It will explore how the growing authoritarian practices of the UK government have been the key reason behind the decline of freedoms as well as cracks in the state's supposedly democratic system.

The paper will argue that COVID-19's becoming a national and global emergency has allowed the current UK government (as of May 2021) to move the country away from the democracy that it once arguably was and instead resort to more authoritarian means. This has meant that the government has gained extraordinary powers over its citizens, thus inevitably moving towards more authoritarian governance. This was done through means such as increased surveillance through the Test and Trace app (later renamed the NHS COVID-19 app, but still serving the same functions as before) and undermining democratic processes, like the suspension of local and mayoral elections.

This argument will be first presented through clarification of the meanings of 'authoritarianism' and 'democracy' as a means of distinguishing the two in the context of the UK. Having defined the concepts, the paper will then demonstrate how the two have existed pre-COVID-19, and how in recent times there has been a pattern of a decline of democracy and a rise of authoritarianism. Subsequently, it will point to *mass surveillance* as one of the key aspects of the increasingly authoritarian nature of the UK government, arguing that it has increasingly resorted to surveillance with the justification of a *state of emergency*. The paper will then discuss how democracy has been undermined in the course of the pandemic through the postponement of local and mayor elections as well as a lack of accountability over the government's mismanagement of the pandemic, revealing a tendency, which may be a dangerous precedent, towards an 'elective dictatorship' (Lord Hailsham in Tyler, 2020). Following this, the *Policing Bill* will be taken into account as revealing the government's striving for greater power over its citizens and a dismissal of freedom of expression (here in the form of protests). Finally, the paper will discuss how information has been a key component of the government's increasingly authoritarian practices, through misinformation, political spin, the threatening of media professionals, and the withholding of information for exclusive use by selective media outlets. The paper will conclude that, while a lot of the issues discussed already existed in the pre-COVID world, a time of global emergency has allowed the UK government to bypass checks and balances. It has also allowed the government to implement decisions that,

among other things, can be considered as part of authoritarian practices, setting up a dangerous precedent for the country as moving away from the freedoms of democracy and towards more authoritarian governance.

### **Authoritarianism and Democracy in the UK**

When discussing authoritarianism and its rise in the UK, the meaning and contestation of the definition of this concept must be taken into account. Authoritarianism, in its most popular understanding, refers to a type of government and governance with no 'free and fair elections' as well as 'a desire for order and hierarchy and a fear of outsiders' (Glasius, 2018, 516). The contested nature of this concept comes into play when it is used in reference to democratic states and their leaders, as they come into power based on supposedly free and fair elections, unlike what the most common definitions of authoritarianism indicate. I will suggest that authoritarianism goes beyond its understanding just as a style of government. The idea of *authoritarian practices* should be considered as a way to assess the actions taken by supposedly democratic governments that mimic those of authoritarian states (Michaelsen and Glasius, 2018). Here, authoritarian practices are defined as actions that 'sabotage accountability and thereby threaten democratic processes' (Michaelsen and Glasius, 2018, 3789).

The presence of authoritarian practices in the UK cannot be discussed without also taking into account the country's identity as a democratic state. A definition of the concept of democracy is crucial to distinguishing it from authoritarianism and discussing both in the context of the UK and the COVID-19 pandemic. The concept of democracy takes its roots from ancient Greece with the respective components of 'demos' (demo-) meaning people and 'kratos' (-cracy) meaning power or rule (Fleck and Hanssen, 2006, 116). This can also be translated into democracy being the 'rule by the people' or 'the power of the people' (Ober, 2008, 3).

Democracy in its modern understanding is less straightforward than 'rule by the people', as many types of democracy exist today and its meaning is contested. However, the most common associations when it comes to democracy are the liberal and representative kinds. Liberal democracy, which is also often known as Western democracy, rests on, as the name would suggest, ideas of liberalism. Bollen (1993, 1208) defines liberal democracy 'as the extent to which a political system allows political liberties and democratic rule'. He argues that political



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liberties relate to individual freedoms such as expressing political opinions (Bollen, 1993). He further states that democratic rule ‘exists to the extent that the national government is accountable to the general population, and each individual is entitled to participate in the government directly or through representatives’ (Bollen, 1993, 1209). Others (e.g., Huntington, 1984; Schumpeter, 2006) make a similar observation regarding liberal democracy and the importance of democratic rule as part of the definition.

In looking at the definitions of democracy and authoritarianism, it is evident that the two stand in direct opposition with each other, because while democracy is about free and fair elections, authoritarianism is about a lack thereof. Where democracy stresses freedoms, authoritarianism does not aim to do so. However, this does not mean that the two cannot co-exist in certain cases. Authoritarianism and democracy are both styles of government as much as they are governance, meaning that a state can still be authoritarian and resort to forms of democratic governance, and, similarly, democratic governments can resort to authoritarian governance. Governance in this case is presumed to be the behaviour of a state’s leadership. Thus, the idea of authoritarian practices suggests that there is such a thing as a democracy with authoritarian characteristics or practices, or an authoritarian democracy in short, under which there are still elections, but the power of the government is significantly larger than that of a traditional democracy (Edel, 2018; Walle, 2012). Given the idea that many forms of democracy exist, such as ‘electoral democracy’, ‘majoritarian democracy’, and ‘quasi-democracy’, the emergence of democracy with authoritarian characteristics is only one more egg to add to the basket of forms of democracy. This paper does not suggest that the UK has become an authoritarian state. However, it does allude to the idea that the supposedly democratic structures present in the state are being eroded quicker than ever, with the COVID-19 pandemic plaguing the world and the UK government choosing to engage in certain authoritarian practices.

Having clarified what is meant by *authoritarianism*, *democracy*, and the distinction between the two, this article will proceed to discuss how the two have co-existed in the UK up to recent times before the COVID-19 pandemic struck the country and the world.

Returning to the time shortly before the pandemic, the (still current) UK government found itself wound up in a scandal over its prorogation of Parliament

in September 2019. The decision of the government to suspend Parliament was ruled to be unlawful by the UK Supreme Court (Kentish & Dearden, 2019). Lady Hale, the court's most senior judge, commented that the government's decision to prorogue Parliament had been 'unlawful because it had the effect of frustrating or preventing the ability of Parliament to carry out its constitutional functions without reasonable justification'; thus, directly undermining democracy (Dickson, 2019).

Authoritarian practices of government have not only been presented through very public instances like the aforementioned prorogation, but also more hidden initiatives. In 2013, the infamous case of Edward Snowden's whistleblowing revealed that the UK had been 'collecting, processing, and storing vast quantities of global digital communication, including email messages, posts, and private messages on social networks, internet history, and phone calls' (Amnesty International, 2020). This had later repercussions, as the UK's *mass surveillance* was ruled to be unlawful under the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) in 2018 (Agerholm, 2018). Taking into consideration the importance of individual rights and freedoms in a democracy, the issue directly undermined these principles concerning one's privacy.

These two instances of authoritarian practices by the UK government before COVID-19 are only a very small fraction of a bigger problem looming over the UK and concerning its status as a democratic country. With the pandemic becoming a global emergency, the problem has become even more prevalent and widespread.

### **The Surveillance State**

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the surveillance of ordinary citizens in the UK. This turn was actively encouraged by the government itself, through means such as the Test and Trace app, an increased police presence in public spaces, the encouragement of neighbours reporting each other to the police for breaking government rules regarding the pandemic, an increase in car stops, and the questioning of people's intentions for travelling (Bloomfield, 2020; Holmes, McCurry, & Safi, 2020). Although these specific actions have been unique to the current pandemic, the mass surveillance of citizens in the UK is not new. The aforementioned Snowden revelations demonstrated the extent to which the UK

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had access to everyone's private information, this being almost a decade ago now, in 2013 (Amnesty International, 2020).

However, despite the presence of surveillance pre-COVID-19, its drastic increase was deemed necessary by the current government under the excuse of the global pandemic to keep everyone safe. Contact-tracing apps, which have emerged all around the world as a response to the pandemic, and in an attempt to control it, were initially dubbed by some as invading the privacy of individuals and a tool of authoritarian states as a means of control (Holmes, McCurry, & Safi, 2020). Hence, countries like the UK did not implement them until much later into 2020, in comparison to others (for example, Singapore, which was one of the first countries to start use a contact-tracing app in March 2020) for fear of being found to use the same means as authoritarian states like China (Flanagan, 2020; Jee, 2020; Mageit, 2020). The UK rolled out its Track and Trace initiative in the spring of 2020, before recalling the app for further development, as well as switching to a decentralised version of the app, as it provided great privacy for individuals (Cellan-Jones & Kelion, 2020). However, despite the initial fears about how much private data the app would be able to access, as well as its being similar to means that authoritarian states like China have used to trace cases, it became clear there is a question to be asked about whether rolling out an app like Test and Trace, which is its safety for the personal privacy of individuals. Furthermore, the surveillance introduced with this app has raised concerns for how the same ways of tracking individuals could become a norm in the UK even after the pandemic passes, leading to a slippery slope of mass surveillance of the population in the country beyond the state of emergency constituted by COVID-19 (Holmes, McCurry, & Safi, 2020).

Surveillance has manifested itself through more than just the Track and Trace app. Increased policing of the public has been another great concern during the pandemic. Those spending time outside could be approached by a police officer for the simple fact of being outside, without having done anything wrong or suspicious, reiterating the government's striving towards greater control over what anyone and everyone is doing outside the comfort of their own house. These actions have been justified as a means of taking control over the pandemic; however, many felt that they were highly invasive, especially considering that they extended beyond surveillance by individual police officers and included the use of drones to film members of the public (Caluori, 2020). The surveillance over

daily mundane activities resonated as an authoritarian undertone, as it demonstrated an institutional need for control over the public engaged in even the simplest tasks like walking outside.

### **The Undermining of Democracy**

The pandemic has put the effective working of democracy in jeopardy. However, it wasn't at the hands of the disease that anti-democratic actions took place in the UK, but rather the country's government and its decisions during the pandemic. One of the biggest ways in which the government has undermined the country's democracy was through the delaying of local and mayoral elections, with the defense that it would not be safe to carry them out during a pandemic (Coronavirus Act, 2020). Like mass surveillance, this action had been implemented before the pandemic; however, with the emergence of COVID-19, the government had the perfect excuse to suspend democracy without being questioned over its actions, as the country was in a national state of emergency. The local and mayoral elections due to take place in spring 2020 were moved to take place in 2021 on the same date (Coronavirus Act, 2020). Despite the framing of them being postponed as a means of containing the virus, arguments have been made that this was a convenient way for the Conservative Party in power to prolong its hold over various areas throughout the country, despite the party's diminishing popularity before and during the pandemic (James & Clark, 2021).

The most recent announcement of the budget has also presented a similar problem of the government trying to keep a hold on strategic areas to help it stay in power. The budget presented a £1bn scheme of funding for towns throughout England that were categorised as 'struggling', with a large majority of them being represented by Conservative Members of Parliament (MPs) (Walker & Allegretti, 2021). The Labour opposition leader Sir Keir Starmer argued that the funding felt 'like pork-barrel politics'; that is, these areas were getting funding in return for votes for those who provided the funding; in this case, the Conservative Party (Woodcock, 2021). Taking the focus back to the elections, this move was crucial given the upcoming local and mayoral elections if the Conservative party wanted to stay in power in the key strategic areas where the elections were being held. However, this type of funding can be perceived as a bribe, thus making the elections unfair, as they are based on a barter deal rather than how the constituents feel about the performance of elected officials. Furthermore, taking

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into account that many local elections in England had already been postponed even before the pandemic, this set a precedent towards a potential 'threat to democratic reforms' and a subsequent move towards a normalisation of the postponement of elections as well as 'pork-barrel' deals, all for the sake of staying in power (James & Clark, 2021).

### The Undermining of Civil Liberties

With COVID-19 becoming a nationwide and global issue, the UK government has enjoyed 'a taste of ruling by decree' justified in a time of a vast emergency (Guardian, 2021). The very recent *Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill* is part of this governance, which has inevitably made it so that civil liberties are undermined, along with other problems like increased inequality (White, 2021; Guardian, 2021). If passed as legislation, this bill would give the police more powers to clamp down on protests, no matter how small or big. Furthermore, it would allow for more Stop and Search powers and could lead to even further racial profiling, something which is already a big problem in the UK (Casciani, 2021; White, 2021). The bill has been highly criticised for giving the police too many powers and setting a precedent for their overreaching of powers in instances like peaceful protests, as well as giving 'too much power to the executive to change the law by decree' (Walker, 2021). This directly echoes the situation in Hungary earlier in 2020, with the passage of a law authorizing rule by decree in the country, and the international response that the situation received as representing a crisis for Hungarian democracy and a move towards authoritarianism (Bayer, 2020). Although the Policing Bill in the UK is nowhere near as drastic, it has showcased a potential for the UK government to step out of its power confines and act without any constraints or be affected by checks and balances that would otherwise be there to hold the government to account over its actions and decisions.

One of the most glaring threats to civil liberties has been in the form of the Coronavirus Act itself. Although the act was a necessary tool to ensure the safety of the country and its need for battling the pandemic, it has also been a source of extraordinary and unprecedented powers, ones never seen before (Spurrier, 2020). The act has also been the reason for many of the aforementioned actions taken by the government, and how its otherwise outrageous actions have been defended under the declaration of a state of emergency. The greater power of the police, and the suspension or delaying of elections, have all been among the allowed actions

under the act. While they have been necessary for the handling of the pandemic, what makes the act so dangerous to civil liberties is the vagueness over when the act will end, meaning that it could be prolonged indefinitely (Hickman, Dixon, & Jones, 2020; Spurrier, 2020). Although the act itself has been enacted for the greater good of the country, the issue of its undermining civil liberties still stands and this marks it as being of an authoritarian character.

### **Information as a Tool of Authoritarianism**

Another important issue around the discussions of the UK government's authoritarian practices is that of information. Information is central in criticisms of authoritarian governments, with phrases like 'Chinese propaganda' often being used in a derogatory manner for states with this style of governance. Although the UK is regarded as a democracy, it too has been faced with issues of misinformation and political spin in the hands of the government, as well as a lack of access to information by selected media, with access being denied by the government. This issue is not a new one; however, with COVID-19 being an unknown entity when it first emerged, information has taken on an ever-increasing importance throughout the pandemic.

One of the most glaring ways that this issue has presented itself is through the undermining of media freedom. The UK government blacklisting *Declassified UK*, an investigative journalism media outlet, has earned the country a warning from the Council of Europe over its 'threatening press freedom' in an attempt to censor the outlet (Stone, 2020). The International Press Institute (IPI) has gone on to comment that 'criticism should be no reason to discriminate against a media publication', clearly showcasing that the government's attempt at censoring the media outlet was seen as an infringement on the latter's right to reportage (Stone, 2020). However, this was not the only instance during the pandemic where the UK government tried to silence media outlets. In February of last year, Downing Street tried to exclude several journalists from attending one of the government's briefings, which in turn resulted in journalists walking out of the briefing *en masse* (Mason & Sparrow, 2020). Later in the year, in one of the government's coronavirus press conferences, in April 2020, a journalist representing *Open Democracy* was banned from asking questions (Cusick, 2020). The government's attempts at controlling who gets access to information on COVID-19 and who gets to question the government versus who does not have meant that freedom

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of the press has been significantly undermined in these situations. Furthermore, this went directly against the principle of freedom of expression as one of the cornerstones of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights set out by the United Nations (United Nations, 2021).

Although it is unexpected behaviour for a democracy to curtail media freedom, this is not new for the UK, and it is certainly a tactic that is prevalent under authoritarian regimes. Incidents of this nature had also taken place even before the pandemic, such as one in 2013 with the Guardian being ordered 'to destroy hard drives containing copies of intelligence files unveiling National Security Agency's (NSA) snooping programme', making media freedom an ongoing issue (Muižnieks, 2014, 101). The repetitive nature of its attempts at curtailing media freedom suggests that the UK might not be the democracy that it had claimed to be, either pre-pandemic or during and after it. However, issues of media freedom alone cannot be a marker for the level of democracy, or in this case, authoritarianism in any given country, and this also applies to the UK.

Although issues regarding media freedom have not only emerged as a result of the pandemic but also existed before the global emergency, their prevalence has significantly risen at the same time as COVID-19, in conjunction with other practices that could be regarded as authoritarian. The censorship of media, as well as the lack of media freedom, has not been an issue exclusive to the UK or authoritarian states, but it is an issue that has grown just as steadily as issues of democracy and general freedom, and the UK has been one of the culprits in contributing to all three (Repucci, 2019).

## Conclusion

COVID-19, a global pandemic and crisis for many countries, has uncovered the prevalence and severity of many issues around the world. In particular, this paper has focused on the rise of authoritarian practices in the UK incited by the government through various means. Although, as we have seen, the government's resorting to authoritarian means was not a new issue, these practices have accelerated with the prevalence of COVID-19. There was a vast range of actions taken by the government, the first of which was increased surveillance on its citizens through initiatives such as the Test and Trace app, moving closer towards a *surveillance state*. Mass surveillance has been identified as one of the key components present

in authoritarian states as a tool of monitoring and control, and this paper has suggested that there is a potential for the same thing to happen with the UK. Subsequently, it discussed how democracy in the UK has been undermined by the government during COVID-19 and how this might be a precedent for the country that portends a move towards authoritarianism. This was demonstrated through a discussion of the suspension of local and mayoral elections across the UK, as well as how the most recent national budget ties into this issue. It then discussed how civil liberties have been curtailed through the recent push for the Policing Bill, as well as how the Coronavirus Bill itself has been dangerous in its nature. Finally, the paper examined how information and access to it have been a central issue that has persisted throughout the pandemic. More specifically, the paper focused on the UK government's limiting media freedom through various means.

These issues and arguments have together painted a picture of the UK government that is less than perfect. Although many of these problems existed in the pre-pandemic world, they only got worse as COVID-19 struck the country and made it possible for the government to enact authoritarian practices. In framing their decisions around the pandemic as a state of emergency, the government has been able to bypass many checks and balances that would otherwise be there. This has set a dangerous precedent for the country's future, marking a potential for a turn towards greater authoritarian means, something that has not been a unique situation in the UK by any means, but, rather, a growing 'trend' amongst several European democracies, with their shift towards democratic rule with authoritarian characteristics.

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## HAS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ALLOWED THE UK TO MOVE TOWARDS MORE AUTHORITARIAN PRACTICES?

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# 7

## A COMPARITIVE STUDY OF THE MANAGEMENT OF COVID-19 IN DEVELOPED AND EMERGING COUNTRIES

*Cassidy Mattingly*

### **Abstract**

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, the world has struggled to eradicate the virus. China, with a population of 1.4 billion, is not only the most highly populated, but also one of the poorest countries in the world. Nevertheless, China has emerged as one of the most successful countries in managing the pandemic. Immediately after the virus spread in Wuhan, Chinese authorities took speedy action, implementing restrictions to stop the spread of the disease. Compared to developed nations in the West, China is recognised as a model for countries to follow in dealing with the pandemic. This article is a comparative analysis of the different strategies employed in Eastern and Western countries. Using the case studies of China and Iran from the East and the United Kingdom from the West, an assessment of the degrees of success to which each managed the pandemic is made.

### **Introduction**

The unprecedented outbreak of COVID-19 originated in Wuhan, China, with the first recorded case occurring in December of 2019. It was not until March of 2020 that the World Health Organization categorized the outbreak as a pandemic (Anon, 2020). From the outbreak's onset, China took swift action to reduce contagion as quickly as possible through various means; these included widespread testing, contact tracing, the confinement of infected patients, and social distancing measures for the entirety of the population (Martinez, 2020). In Hubei, the hotbed of infection, schools and workplaces were closed, and all sporting and cultural events were cancelled. While China has been heavily praised for

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its quick and successful containment of the virus, some Western countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, have been under heavy scrutiny for not following China's lead in their efforts to mitigate the virus (Martinez, 2020). In an exploration of various containment efforts used in the West and the East, this article aims to assess the varying degrees of success to which China, the UK, Iran, and Kuwait have mitigated the COVID-19 pandemic. Although authoritarianism might not be an ideal governmental structure to some, this article confirms that the centralization of power, decision-making, and state services provided by China suggest that a top-down governmental approach is best for mitigating COVID-19.

### **China**

The two widely contrasting approaches taken by China and the United Kingdom to combat COVID-19 stem from the difference in regime structure between the two countries. Authoritarian China was able to more quickly respond to the outbreak, providing a plethora of resources to its people for free, while the democratic United Kingdom dragged its feet in acknowledging the severity of the issue at hand. Neoliberalism and democratic socialism serve as the two economic philosophies which drove each country to respond in the manners that they did.

After the virus became a serious threat to the country, the government swiftly broadcast news that all testing and treatments for COVID-19 would be provided to everyone at no charge (Martinez, 2020). In efforts to ease the financial hardship incurred by families who may have been affected by the virus, it suspended mortgage and credit card payments, and arranged stipends so that people could still rely on the continual payments of a living wage (Martinez, 2020).

The focus of the national healthcare system was to keep people alive. China implemented various technological methods in its eradication strategy, such as a smartphone app that allowed people to stay informed on the latest information regarding the virus, as well as report and track symptoms. This simultaneously provided the government and medical professionals with the ability to oversee the transmission rates and patterns of the virus (Chaturvedi, 2020; Martinez, 2020). Artificial intelligence has been used to predict outbreaks, and robots have been deployed to deliver meals to those in quarantine (Jakhar, 2020; Martinez, 2020). The World Health Organization has recognized China's efforts, stating that it

averted hundreds of thousands of potential cases through its unprecedented containment strategy (Martinez, 2020).

China's socialist structure provides the opportunity for its containment strategy to be 'people-' focused, rather than profit-driven (Martinez, 2020). The attitude of 'if one is sick, we are all potentially sick' (Walby, 2020) was upheld and practiced at every step of the enactment of the containment strategy; the liabilities associated with COVID-19 were distributed among the entire community, rather than just the individual affected by the virus (Walby, 2020). The Chinese government successfully provided support to its people in various sectors throughout the pandemic, including education, employment, social security, medical services, housing, and the environment, as well as the intellectual and cultural life of the country (Martinez, 2020). The centralized scheme of economic oversight made a mobilization of resources possible during the crisis (Martinez, 2020). As President Xi Jinping said, "Our greatest strength lies in our socialist system, which enables us to pool resources in a major mission. This is the key to our success" (Lorreta, 2020).

China's socialist approach, evidenced in its political regime and extending to the COVID-19 containment strategy undertaken, benefitted the country in a few key ways. First and foremost, lives were saved, and the health of the Chinese people remained at the forefront of concern for the government. Secondly, China regained global respect and proved itself an example to the rest of the world in successful mitigation, due to quick action and the overall compliance of the people. Lastly, the progressive use of technological methods of treatment and the accountability fostered through the widespread use of smartphone tracking apps proved efficient in keeping people inside their homes and compliant with the health and government standards set forth.

### **The United Kingdom**

As for the United Kingdom, the democratic, neoliberal-infused stance taken during the pandemic has produced lacklustre results. In contrast to the socialist, "all hands-on deck" approach, a more nominal intervention was taken in order to save the economy from further destruction (Walby, 2020). To quote Prime Minister Boris Johnson's chief adviser, Dominic Cummings, "protect the economy and if that means some pensioners die, too bad"; this remained the attitude of



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the administration during the initial onset of the spread to the United Kingdom (Martinez, 2020; Paton, 2020). Rather than establishing affordable and accessible testing and treatment measures for British residents and citizens, the British government refused to comment on the pandemic until mid-March. At this time, hundreds of cases within the country had already been confirmed (Martinez, 2020).

Although the World Health Organization had suggested that widespread testing should be carried out in order to track and trace the spread of the virus, Chris Whitty, Britain's Chief Medical Officer, suggested that it would not be essential in curbing the case numbers (Martinez, 2020). Other leaders also proved reluctant to take the emergence of the pandemic within the UK seriously; Prime Minister Boris Johnson stated that the nation should "just take it on the chin" (Martinez, 2020), suggesting that it was inevitable that many would suffer from COVID-19 and die from the virus. Finally, after much global criticism of the United Kingdom's negligence, on March 20, all schools, restaurants, pubs, retail establishments, and all other non-essential businesses shut down in order to alleviate the spread (Martinez, 2020). Navarro (2020) suggests that neoliberalism, which has been particularly prevalent in the UK through the austerity politics exacerbated by Brexit (Yamey and Wenham, 2020), has significantly hampered the capabilities of countries to recover from pandemics.

Consistent with the neoliberal framework, the privatization of many key public resources, such as healthcare and other services that protect vulnerable populations, has significantly impeded the possibility of an expeditious recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic (Navarro, 2020). The commercialization of medicine, the deregulation and globalization of capital and labour, and the expansion of the administrative approaches of social austerity have had very negative impacts during epidemics and pandemics; SARS, Ebola, MERS, and now COVID-19 serve as examples (Navarro, 2020). These neoliberal austerity policies have contributed to the spread of these diseases in the West (Navarro, 2020). According to the World Health Organization (2019), provisions that significantly help countries mitigate pandemics include robust and fully developed healthcare and social systems, as well as an extensive program for fighting the said pandemic.

Although the National Healthcare System in the UK is mature and well-equipped, the government's protocol for mitigating the virus, which was critically lacking in all aspects, is the reason why the nation failed to control the spread of the virus

appropriately. With two starkly contrasted examples of the COVID-19 alleviation strategy, an analysis of Kuwait and Iran will further explore the varying degrees of success to which COVID-19 has been tackled on a global scale.

## Overview of the Middle Eastern Experience

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus emerged in the Middle East at a time when the region was already struggling. The fall in crude oil prices has negatively affected even the most prosperous Gulf countries. The pandemic has had a drastically adverse effect on supply and demand, and health/safety restrictions have forced many individuals to stay home and institutions to close, preventing businesses from continuing to stimulate the economy (COVID-19 Crisis Response in MENA Countries, 2020). Although some countries have been successful in flattening the curve, others remain stunted by the virus. A study of Iran and Kuwait will demonstrate the varying degrees of success that countries in the Middle East have had in managing the pandemic.

### Iran

When assessing the success with which Iran has mitigated the COVID-19 pandemic, it is very difficult to grasp the effects that the virus has had on the country. As Valadbaygi (2020) suggests, a new, hybrid form of neoliberalism has pervaded the state; its reform measures are evident in the containment strategy upheld against COVID-19, which mirrors the strategy of the United Kingdom in a few key ways. The neoliberal restructuring scheme of Iran was provoked by the global crisis of over-inflation prevalent in the Global South during the 1980s. In efforts to invigorate the accumulation of capital, associates of the ruling class saw greater assimilation into the international economy as a method that could spawn economic growth (Valadbaygi, 2020). In June of 1990, representatives from both the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (both neoliberal institutions) visited Tehran, and then reported the commitment of Iran towards economic liberalization, which would be implemented by significant institutional and structural changes (Valadbaygi, 2020). Since then, a new form of neoliberalism has been prevalent in the state, as Western capitalist narratives have intermingled with Iranian traditional practices (Valadbaygi, 2020).

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The first case of COVID-19 was diagnosed on the nineteenth of February. Since then, Iran has remained in the top ten ranking of countries most negatively affected (Mahdavi, 2020). Much concern has been raised by not only the Iranian people, but also many other international health and political leaders surrounding the lack of transparency in specific COVID-19 case numbers (Ortagus, 2020). While China, other countries in Asia, and Europe expeditiously cancelled flights, closed borders, and warned their citizens of the severity of the pandemic, the Iranian administration instead menaced and jailed citizens who spoke out in concern against their government and things they had heard about the surge in cases (Ortagus, 2020). Classified evidence of transparent case numbers procured by news outlets suggests that the death toll was upwards of 42,000 by the end of July, which is a stark increase from the 14,000 reported by the Iranian Health Ministry at that time (Ali, 2020). The constant circulation of misinformation from the Iranian administration leads health experts and citizens to believe that daily case numbers and the total death toll could be significantly higher than these reports indicate (Ali, 2020). Similar to the explanation from former President Donald Trump in the United States (Feuer, 2020), Iranian officials suggested that a steep increase in cases directly correlated with testing becoming more widely available. However, a look back at the timeline in which restrictions were eased may reveal a different explanation (Ali, 2020).

In the months of April and May, as daily diagnosis figures decreased, shopping malls and bazaars, mosques, restaurants, museums, and public transport were reopened. In August, the country observed a steep incline in cases, with the virus now moving from the once contained areas of Tehran and Qom towards the south-west. Health officials blamed citizens for their lack of regard of the COVID-19 health standards pushed by the administration, suggesting that an approximate 50% decrease in participation in following the health guidelines had been detected (Ali, 2020).

Traditionally, neoliberal reforms have impacted global healthcare systems in an extremely negative way. The assertion of the superior importance of free markets over the individual's right to health leads to a disempowerment of citizens, as their healthcare becomes subordinate to the markets (Sakellariou & Rotarou, 2017). The detrimental results of not implementing a national healthcare system, especially during a global pandemic, are evidenced in astronomical out-of-pocket payments, as well as jeopardized access to healthcare (Sakellariou & Rotarou, 2017).

It is unfair for the Iranian government to blame citizens for a lack of regard to COVID-19 health standards, when those who may not have access or the ability to afford healthcare may not be able to abide by the standards set forth. With the economy and healthcare reportedly on the verge of cataclysm (Hein, 2020; Mahdavi, 2020), it is imperative that Iran formulate stricter restrictions and begin to report cases more transparently. The country would also benefit from considering the implementation of a COVID-19 healthcare relief fund, in order to ensure that its citizens have no reason to not abide by the rules and regulations set forth.

### **Economic Impact in Iran**

The downfall of the Iranian economy can be directly linked to recent international strife with the United States. Plunging oil prices in combination with the U.S.-prompted sanctions have led the country to a point of persistently high inflation, high unemployment, and inactive demand within the Iranian economy. After former President Trump withdrew from the nuclear deal with the United States, China, France, Germany, Russia, and Britain (signed in 2015), the United States commenced a high-pressure crusade to demand Iran's withdrawal from intercession in the Middle East (Mahdavi, 2020). Then, at the beginning of 2020, Trump ordered the execution of top military commander Qasem Soleimani, under the assumption that a premeditated attack against the American people would put lives at risk. Iran responded with missile attacks on two U.S. bases in Iraq (Marcus, 2020).

These events marked a stark acceleration of the strain in the relationship between Washington and Tehran. Since Trump's abandonment of the nuclear deal, the United States has repeatedly denied requests from Iranian officials to impermanently pause sanctions during the pandemic (Mahdavi, 2020). Although Iran contends that it will be nearly impossible to provide monetary relief to citizens and recover economically once the virus is contained, Trump has repeatedly ignored the advice of other international leaders (including current President Biden), stating that the United States "has and continues to offer humanitarian assistance to the Iranian people to help address the coronavirus outbreak. It is unfortunate for the Iranian people that their government has rejected this offer. Our priority has been to stand with the Iranian people and this offer is still on the table" (Ortagus, 2020).

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Various individual, structural, and economic factors explain why Iran failed to mitigate COVID-19 in a timely manner. On an individual basis, a lack of self-efficacy and little knowledge about COVID-19 and the ways in which citizens should protect themselves can be noted. Structurally, factors such as lack of access to healthcare services and supplies, and a deficiency in strict supervision and implementation of restrictions, may be to blame. Economically, the cost of living, which is certainly too high for most people to afford without working, played a part in the failure of Iran to curb the virus expeditiously. The overall lack of governmental economic support throughout the pandemic also explains why a refusal on part of Iranian citizens to comply with government regulations could be observed (Soleimanvand et al., 2021). Iran would benefit from implementing a healthcare relief fund to aid in covering the costs of health supplies and the treatment of citizens infected, but the prevention of the virus as well. Had the country moved all non-essential businesses to an online working model in the heat of the outbreak, many fewer cases would have been observed. A transparent reporting of cases prevalent throughout the country would have also led to citizens taking the virus more seriously. Iran's case study of COVID-19 mitigation proves that neoliberal policies do not support an expedited alleviation of the virus.

### **Kuwait**

The constitutional monarchical state of Kuwait contains a mixed scheme of economics that provides a variety of private freedoms, in partnership with a centralized system of economic planning and government regulation. Its semi-democratic political regime is based upon an idea of democracy, aiming to create freedom and equality for all citizens (Political System, 2021). However, as will be discussed further in this section, Kuwait is not deploying measures of equality or democracy in its handling of the pandemic.

The first case of COVID-19 in Kuwait was diagnosed on February 24, 2020. As of May 2021, 295,861 Kuwaitis have been diagnosed with the virus, and the country has observed 1,711 deaths. Safety measures put in place to target the social and public sectors include but are not limited to: thermal cameras being adopted for use in Kuwait Airport, the closing of all schools and universities (March-October), a paid holiday for all employees (six weeks for all non-essential workers), flights to and from Kuwait being cancelled until further notice, gatherings in public spaces being prohibited until further direction from the government,

a state-wide curfew, and heavy fines or jail time for Kuwaitis who fail to follow the law. The country claims that measures such as the national paid holiday have significantly reduced the number of COVID-19 cases. A steep rate of contact amongst the population has led experts to suggest that the pinnacle of the epidemic in Kuwait has yet to be encountered, meaning that stricter measures must be taken in order to limit the spread of the virus. The two major sources from which coronavirus have spread throughout the country were identified as: travelers returning from countries abroad such as the UK and the United States, and the migrant worker population, whose tightly packed living conditions make it very difficult for COVID-19 safety measures to be effectively implemented (Gasana & Shehab, 2020).

The Ministry of Health claims that procedures focused on migrant communities have been successful in reducing the spread of the virus (Gasana & Shehab, 2020). However, much of the Kuwaiti population regards the government and parliament's efforts to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in migrant communities as xenophobic. Between the months of February and April of 2020, a study was conducted that revealed that migrant workers were two times as likely as Kuwaitis to need comprehensive hospital care upon contracting the virus. Upon publication of this study, the government swiftly isolated those expatriate precincts in order to mitigate the spread of the virus. The government also attempted to curtail the population of foreign workers, with the Prime Minister suggesting in June of 2020 that ideally, Kuwaitis would account for 70% of the state's population, with non-Kuwaitis making up only 30% (John, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic in Kuwait has revealed that this illiberal migration state has no plans for caring for all who contribute to its economy. Rather, it is handling the pandemic with what it sees as great success, although its focused efforts to reconfigure the demographic imbalance prove otherwise.

### **Economic Impact in Kuwait**

Although Kuwait remains one of the most affluent nations in the world, a severe debt crisis is pervading the state (Anon., 2020). Advanced by COVID-19, oil prices have fallen to all-time lows. Estimates by Kuwait's national bank reveal unfortunate predictions of the country's deficit reaching 40% of its GDP, which marks the highest level since the times of financial desolation brought upon by the 1990 Iraqi invasion and Gulf War. Currently, crude oil prices are around \$40

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(USD) per barrel, which has led other Arab nations to forge new means to take on their debt, such as reducing subsidies or increasing taxes to support the country's spending (Anon., 2021, 2020). However, Kuwait has not mirrored the tactics of its neighbours. A bill introduced to relieve public debt would provide the necessary avenues for Kuwait to relieve its state of financial emergency. Nonetheless, a huge distrust of the government on the part of the residents of Kuwait, paired with the liquidity crisis, has led to reluctance on part of the government to act in the interest of its people to improve its financial state (Oil-rich Kuwait faces looming debt crisis, 2020). Never before has Kuwait been unable to cover the cost of salaries and subsidies through its oil revenues.

However, COVID-19 has impelled the country into a particularly hard time financially, and salaries and subsidies usually covered by oil revenues will not be paid (Oil-rich Kuwait faces looming debt crisis, 2020; Anon, 2021). Although 70% of the government's budget is allocated to these two things, the current oil prices and government's spending levels have led to the country's general reserve fund completely drying up (Oil-rich Kuwait faces looming debt crisis, 2020). Some experts fear that if the government refuses to increase taxes, the devaluation of the Dinar will be the only resort left to take (Anon., 2021). The intransigence on the part of the Kuwaiti government to pass the public debt bill emanates from a social contract that has been taken up for decades, reducing the welfare state's risks of losing the loyalty of Kuwaiti citizens. In the best-case scenario, the government of Kuwait will review its current financial state, propelled by the COVID-19 outbreak, and reassess the nation's reliance on oil revenues to cover the basic needs of its people for decades to come (Oil-rich Kuwait faces looming debt crisis, 2020).

### Conclusion

In the case studies above, it is evident that China has been the most successful of the four countries discussed in managing the COVID-19 pandemic. Its commitment to widespread testing, the use of innovative methods of treatment, and quick action have all led to minimal deaths and a stellar global reputation for its efforts (Martinez, 2020). On the other hand, the UK, Iran and Kuwait have all failed to successfully manage the pandemic, for some reasons that overlap and others that are outliers. For one, the United Kingdom was very hesitant to take any action even after the virus had reached and affected many residents. Although its

privatized healthcare system should have led to a quick extinguishing of the virus, the government's lacklustre leadership and neoliberal policies prevented the focus from remaining on the people, rather than profit. Kuwait has chosen to place its focus on 'rebalancing' the population, rather than aiming to improve the living conditions of expatriate workers so that the community can be better protected from the virus (John, 2020). The country would be more successful in managing the outbreak if the focus was shifted towards the maintenance of social distancing in public spaces, as well as improved living conditions for migrant workers. As for Iran, were its government to value transparency and swift action, the country would receive a lot less criticism from international leaders and simultaneously gain restored faith in its leadership from the Iranian people.

As stated in Horgan's article, "If neoliberalism was already on life support, then coronavirus has administered the lethal blow. The pandemic has laid bare the disastrous consequences of decades of privatization, deregulation and outsourcing in countries like the US and UK and highlighted the critical importance of strong public services and a well-resourced state bureaucracy" (Horgan, 2020). Although authoritarianism is not the most sought-after governmental structure, the centralization of power, decision-making, and state services provided by China prove that the top-down governmental approach has best mitigated COVID-19 (Horgan, 2020). Moving forward, the rest of the world (including the UK, US, Iran, and Kuwait) would benefit from taking a more unanimous state-wide approach that mimics the progressive efforts of China in order to eliminate the spread of COVID-19 for good.

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# 8

## COVID-19: PRAYUT CHAN-O-CHA'S EXCUSE FOR POLITICAL REPRESSION

*Jamie Greenfield*

### **Abstract**

Political instability has corrupted Thailand since the abolition of absolute monarchy in 1932, with numerous successful coups d'état shifting the balance of power between the three major societal institutions of the military, monarchy, and democracy. Junta rule since the 2014 coup d'état has worsened democracy, through delayed elections and a revised constitution. With protestors initially questioning the authority of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-Cha, they have more recently been pushing for reform of Thailand's most sacred institution, the Bureau of the Royal Household. As the Covid-19 pandemic hit Thailand, the introduction of strict emergency laws to stop the spread of the coronavirus were put in place. These executive powers enabled the government to control political debate while the National Emergency Act 2005 was being discussed, in order to shut down opposition to the government. By analysing government statements and describing the situation, this paper will shed light on the growing political crisis in Thailand and how the Royal Thai Government has abused its executive powers. With the aim of ending pro-democracy protests in the name of Covid-19 restrictions, the relation between the military, monarchy, and democracy will be highlighted, along with how it continues to play a vital role in institutional struggles in the Kingdom of Thailand.

### **Introduction**

Covid-19 has provided a unique chance to reflect on our society and what we can and ought to do to improve the institutions with which we are surrounded. For many countries in South-East Asia, the coronavirus has accelerated demands to improve democracy and live free from foreign interference and authoritarian domestic governments. The 'Milk Tea Alliance' between Hong Kong, Taiwan, and

Thailand has as its goal to promote and implement free and fair democratic institutions. Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-Cha's lockdown legislation put an end to the protests that began in February 2020 over disapproval of the government and the desire for a free society. Since June 2020, the demands have become far greater and many people have started to question the most sacred institution, the Royal Household. Questioning the authority of the military government and monarchy has created concern amongst royalist elites across the kingdom, a concern expressed so far through the use of water cannons laced with chemical irritants (Beech and Suhartono, 2020).

This paper will first assess what led to Thailand's continued political instability in terms of the role of coups d'état. With military intervention and public unease about the newly coronated monarch, this has created a discussion over the future of the kingdom and the Chakri Dynasty itself. As Covid-19 reached Thailand, the response on the part of the government was widely accepted and regarded as a success, with transmission remaining low and deaths remaining among the lowest in the region. With lockdown restrictions beginning to wind down in June 2020, the government kept these state of emergency laws in the name of public health concerns, but with the intentions of ending the pro-democracy protests and silencing opposition to the junta-led government.

In looking at the demands made by the youth protestors, it becomes clear that the Royal Thai Government has been using Covid-19 powers to justify trying to disperse crowds, with laws made to protect the monarchy that have been altered to protect the government instead. In the face of accusations of human rights abuses levelled at the Prime Minister, the military sought to grasp and hold onto as much power as possible. This paper will show how the Covid-19 restrictions have proved problematic for flawed democracies, and, if they continue to be abused by the state, will ultimately lead to the downfall of functional, liberal democracies in regions where they are desperately needed.

## **Military and Monarchy**

Thai political institutions require the confidence of the monarchy for the government to be effective and long-lasting. For the outside world, Thailand is a key tourism destination, with islands and scenic beaches; however, domestic issues present a different reality. The majority of governments in modern Thailand

have been dominated by military juntas. Understanding why this is the case provides a background for understanding the current instability. The political structure of the kingdom runs on three institutions – democracy, the military, and the monarchy. During the reign of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, military generals governed with his personal backing, in order to maintain stability and reduce the risk of radical groups arising in the kingdom. Despite stability being a term not much associated with Thai politics, the relationship between the military and the monarchy has meant the dawning a new era of modernisation for the Kingdom.

When King Bhumibol took the throne in 1950, the monarchy was weak and close to collapsing. Seven years into his reign, allegations of Prime Minister Plaek Phibunsongkhram committing lèse-majesté paved the way for Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat to conduct a coup d'état and be appointed Prime Minister. Thanarat's dictatorship restructured the economy and gave the Royal Family a revered status through royal development projects, which were used to deter Communist insurgency. This relationship continued with the involvement of both the army and the monarchy to suppress Communism by using the royal family to provide rural areas with funding and vital projects. This relationship not only allowed Thailand to develop economically, but provided international allies with the West, especially the US. The relationship between the monarchy and the military has enabled them to protect each other, and while the Royal Household would have preferred democratic institutions, given the devastation of the events of Black May 1992<sup>1</sup>, the need to endorse military coups d'état was seen as essential for the protection of the kingdom and the monarchy. The moment the monarchy becomes subject to pressure from political factors, the military will put an end to it. The past twenty years have presented a shift in Thai politics, with the military acting on instinct against Thaksin Shinawatra due to King Bhumibol's health deteriorating, leading to the 2006 and 2014 coups d'état.

### **The 2014 Coup d'état**

Political instability has been at the centre of Thai politics since the bloodless Siam Revolution of 1932, which abolished the absolute monarchy and established a constitutional monarchy. A coup d'état is defined as an illegal removal of a government through the intervention of either military or political factions; since

1 This was a popular protest of over 20,000 people in Bangkok against the General Suchinda Kraprayoon's government.

1932, Thailand has suffered 12 successful coups. To understand how Thailand has moved towards a breaking point between the government and the protesters, it is important to look at the 2014 coup d'état, which provides a background to the constant power struggle in the kingdom.

The coup of 2014 returned power to the hands of the military after months of violent demonstrations over the actions of former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. Junta governments have been prominent in Thai politics. They can be defined as a military group that is in control of the proceedings of the government. In the case of the 2006 and 2014 coups d'état, along with most previous coups, elected officials are replaced by a junta government. The sister of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, a left-leaning populist who gained the support of many in the working and rural classes of Thailand, was exiled in a coup in 2006 while visiting the United Nations. During one demonstration, supporters of Thaksin wore red shirts, while an opposition crowd started to grow, with protestors whose movement became known as the Yellow Shirts. Yellow is the colour of Monday, which is the birth date of both King Bhumibol and his successor King Vajiralongkorn, and has since been adopted as the royal colour. Thaksin's removal from office was based on "corruption and constant interference with the legislature and courts" (Mydans & Fuller, 2006). Subsequent prime ministers and military rule failed to unite the country, leaving a deeper political divide, and enabling the coup of 2006 to cause more harm to the nation's institutions and to faith in government.

Four unelected Prime Ministers succeeded Thaksin Shinawatra, until Thailand held general elections in 2011. Yingluck Shinawatra won in a landslide victory, and continued to govern until the coup d'état ultimatum in 2014. Yingluck's leadership was tainted by her brother's ability to polarise the country between the working classes and the middle classes in the wealthy cities. The popularity of the Shinawatra family was poised to threaten the power balance of the monarchy, with rural people finding the social programs desirable in contrast to the little help provided by the junta governments. Protests spiralled out of control in 2013 after Yingluck tried to push a bill through Parliament that would "have granted amnesty to Thaksin" (Calamur, 2013) with regard to the corruption allegations. The violent clashes failed to end, despite the king's urging the nation to move towards peace and prosperity in one of his final speeches, on his 86<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2013. By 2014, General Prayut Chan-o-Cha led a bloodless military

coup to oust PM Yingluck Shinawatra over corruption allegations as chairperson of the National Rice Policy Committee, when it was revealed that many farmers had not been paid for their work. As Yingluck stepped down from her post, the military ousted the remaining branches of her government and began its junta rule. As with all of Thailand's governments, King Bhumibol had endorsed the coup, making Prayut Chan-o-Cha Thailand's 29<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister and providing a "roadmap to reform the country and return to democracy by the end of 2015" (Praritsuk, 2015, 203). For the military to ensure law and order, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) was formed as a coalition of military forces and took charge of government departments until 2019, when the junta called elections, four years after that had been promised.

During the four years of junta rule, the military tightened its grip on institutional powers through the writing of a new constitution, overseeing the change in reign within the monarchy, and battling pressures for true democracy in the kingdom. With the 2006 coup d'état, Thailand dropped in Freedom House's ratings from "Free all the way to Not Free" (Pongsudhirak, 2008, p. 140) in one day. The 2017 constitution included several unpopular changes, many of which were aimed at keeping the military in power. These include the 250-seat Senate being appointed by the military and both houses of Parliament "select[ing] a prime minister who had not been elected to a parliamentary seat" (Corben, 2017). These changes allowed Prayut Chan-O-Cha to continue as Prime Minister, despite not being an elected MP. The personal involvement of His Majesty included his having greater control over the assets in the Crown Property Bureau. Historically, the military has had the backing of the monarchy in order to protect the institution, and these constitution changes show that. That the referendum vote on the constitution was delayed because of personal involvement from the king provides insight into the relationship between these two structures. Elections were finally called in 2019, on account of the NCPO's handling of "a sluggish economy, the rise of potentially dangerous military factions, accusations of corruption, and demands for the long-awaited election" (Ricks, 2019, p. 445). Once the election was over, it took over a month of confusion before the Electoral Commission published the election results for the final 150 proportional representation seats, and paved the way for the House of Representatives to select Prayut Chan-o-Cha to continue as Prime Minister (BBC, 2019). Throughout the election, new parties, including 'Future-Forward', spearheaded by businessman Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, who took a third of the votes, supported by younger people who want



a legitimate liberal democracy and the junta to leave the spotlight for good. Every time an opportunity has arisen for the junta to leave office, a matter of national emergency has allowed the military to remain within the heart of government, overseeing the death of King Bhumibol and the coronation of King Vajiralongkorn with Covid-19 sweeping across the world, it provided Prayut Chan-o-Cha with an opportunity to remain as Prime Minister and be the person to lead the response to the pandemic.

### **Thailand's Response to COVID-19**

Southeast Asia's response to the spread of Covid-19 has been hailed a success despite the shortcomings of its American and European partners. As Western nations were trying to understand what states such as Thailand, South Korea, and Vietnam were doing right, cases were surging with no real information on how to flatten the curve. The difference in response was the rapidity of the need to control the transmission and the fears of the epidemic that had hit Asia in 2003. Direct action to slow the spread of transmission was important for governments to enforce strict lockdown measures, with people allowed to leave their homes only for essential purposes. Infection rates and deaths remained statistically low, a point on which Thailand stood out in comparison to its Western counterparts. Understanding the steps that the government took in delivering a concise message on the dangers of Covid-19 is important, as they ultimately kept infection rates down and, most importantly, enabled the country to have a comparatively low death rate.

Lockdowns are by far one of the most productive and effective means to slow the spread of Covid-19. While a lockdown harms economic and social structures, the importance of public health is of utmost priority. The Royal Thai Government had begun fever-screening checks on all passengers entering from Wuhan, China, and on January 13, the Ministry of Public Health "stated that there is one confirmed case of [Covid-19] imported from Wuhan" (MOPH, 2020). The Prime Minister urged the public to remain calm and stated that the government was prepared to respond in a timely and effective manner. As infections were rising by March 24, the government announced the National Emergency Decree, which in effect put the country into lockdown until April 30 (WHO Thailand, 2020), and urged the public to use "surgical masks and hand sanitizer gels, diligently washing hands ... practising social distancing" and "Stay home, Stop the Disease, for

the Nation” (Office of the Prime Minister, 2020, p. 3). Face coverings in most of Asia were commonly worn and were socially accepted before Covid-19, so public messaging to encourage the public to get on board with this was not difficult.

The government response, as previously mentioned, focussed solely on public health, with economic damage a secondary thought, with the IMF predicting that “the Thai economy will shrink by at least 6.5 percent [in 2020]” (Beech, 2020). Economically, Thailand struggled, with much of people’s livelihoods reliant on tourism and hospitality, as bars, shops, and restaurants were forced to close with little help available from the government. The Ministry of Finance was able to distribute “three fiscal stimulus packages worth USD 76.2 billion” (UNCT Thailand, 2020, p. 11), and while this alleviated some of the financial struggle, poverty was dramatically increasing, and the middle classes were being squeezed. Given the determination to impose a National Emergency Decree, more people were becoming economically reliant on a government that did not have its own finances in good shape.

These measures of the lockdown became vital in slowing the spread of Covid-19 in Thailand, but cases were rising through December 2020, and while deaths still remained below 100 as of March 2021 (MOPH, 2021), the importance of “clear communication by health experts, a willingness to allow scientists to lead the response and an effective lockdown” (Ratcliffe, 2020) put Thailand at the forefront against the fight against Covid-19. As the vaccination rollout commenced, the public was being reminded that they are not immune and must continue to wear face coverings and socially distance. Given Prayut Chan-o-Cha’s response to the pandemic not being particularly unique, the effective communication and early implementation of compulsory face masks has significantly lowered the risk of Covid-19 and in effect allowed Thai people to enjoy domestic tourism.

## **Questioning Thai Democracy**

Pro-democracy demonstrations across Thailand began in February 2020, before Covid-19 posed a real threat to the global order. What made these protests stand apart from the political disruption that had dominated Thai politics was that they became a single force against the government. As previously mentioned, Thailand’s government had long been fighting against its own people, causing much violence over political ideology. The protests of 2020 signalled a sharp turn in what

reforms were being demanded, and in this have started to question the very institutions that have been sacred and illegal to speak about in private and public.

Democracy has always been fragile in the kingdom, given the 12 successful coup d'états since the end of the absolute monarchy. Political parties that pose a serious threat to the military elite in Bangkok are constantly being dissolved due to allegations of corruption or disloyalty to the king, causing mass protests focused on the fragility of democracy and open debates in the parliament and within society. The elections in 2019 were the first since Prayut Chan-o-Cha ousted Yingluck Shinawatra and saw a surge of anti-junta parties emerge and secure a reasonable proportion of the votes cast. One party to make strides was the 'Future Forward' party led by the businessman Thanathorn Juangroengruangkit, whose agenda was to restore true democracy to the nation and propose a reform that would end domestic military intervention. On February 21, 2020, the Constitutional Court banned Future Forward for ten years, bringing protestors out to the streets of Bangkok once again (Ratcliffe, 2020).

Covid-19 cases were rising across the country after super-spreader events took place in sports venues across the country, leading to a national lockdown lasting from March 26 to April 30. Citizens complied with the measures until the government extended the State of Emergency from May to the end of June 2020 (Chan-o-Cha, 2020), as a means to curb protests and stop political opposition to the government. These National Emergency Decrees were unable to stop further demonstrations, and every month, the crowds were getting larger and with greater demands. July 18 saw 2,500 protestors demanding the resignation of the government, the amending of the constitution, and an end to the harassment of government critics. By this point, the government was beginning to be backed into a corner of its own building, Government House. Protestors remained surrounding the premises despite threats from the police to disperse the crowd through force. As mentioned, the absence of any group opposed to the pro-democracy protestors and siding with the government was a unique feature of these events. Royalists would come out in rallies in support of the royal family, but not in support of Chan-o-Cha's leadership. By this point, the Thai people had had enough of military juntas and were demanding true democracy, after seeing Bangkok destroyed numerous times over political conflicts. But the movement started to question what had been unspeakable, which had seemingly swung odds in the military's favour: direct criticism of His Majesty King Maha Vajiralongkorn.

The Royal Household has held god-like status in the country since 2016, when the death of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej the Great shook the Kingdom to its core. The power of the monarchy could be seen in almost every home, with portraits of their majesties and the public represented in gestures such as compulsory standing in cinemas during the national anthem and chanting *ทรงพระเจริญ* (“Long Live the King”) at most public events, whether in the presence of the royal family or not. Bhumibol had ruled for over 70 years and became revered throughout Thailand for dedicating his life to eradicating hunger and poverty, building sustainable agriculture, and highlighting the importance of water projects. His royal projects are part of the reason for the success of Thailand’s rapid economic development over the past fifty years. King Bhumibol was a mediator in some difficult periods of Thai politics, and was able to cut through the noise to end the violence. However, discussions between royal elites questioned whether then-Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn would be best suited to the Buddhist throne. King Bhumibol’s daughter, Her Royal Highness (HRH) Princess Chakri Maha Sirindhorn, seemed more suitable to continuing the reign, given her immense popularity and royal projects representing those of Bhumibol and Sirikit. Vajiralongkorn’s personality as a “little bit of a Don Juan” (Branagin, 1981) as described by Queen Mother Sirikit continued to taint his image as one not in line with performance of royal duties and with the keeping of Buddhist values. Given the strict *lèse-majesté* laws, according to which discussion of any topic that may be interpreted as damaging to the Royal Household can result in 15 years’ imprisonment per offence, the public mostly stayed quiet around the question of what King Vajiralongkorn’s reign might bring to the Kingdom. Public disapproval of the monarch began in 2017, after the constitution was personally altered by the Royal Household to “appoint one person or several persons forming a council as Regent” (Office of the Council of State, 2017, 6), effectively allowing His Majesty to rule while absent from the kingdom. Despite this remaining relatively unspoken due to the *lèse-majesté* laws, the power of the king had been put under the spotlight in late July, something which had never been considered to this extent.

As transmission of the virus was slowing down, the protests restarted in early August after German tabloids began reporting on the location of King Maha Vajiralongkorn during the draconian lockdown measures that had been imposed. Tabloids were reporting that His Majesty was ruling from Bavaria in Germany, with his hospitality there funded by Thai taxpayers. Any ill speech about the Royal Household poses serious consequences, but as news spread across social media,

students at Thammasat University in Bangkok announced ten demands for reform of the monarchy. Speaking about the monarchy in this way in private is something to which the Thais are unaccustomed, but for this discussion to take place in a public space is wholly unprecedented. What has shocked critics of the monarchy has been the radio silence from the government, especially after His Majesty personally demanded of Chan-o-Cha that “such [lèse-majesté] prosecutions [be] halted” (Beech, 2021). Six months before this second wave of protests, speaking in this way had been unimaginable, but the climate has changed in Thailand, and there are signs that this could lead to true democratic reform.

As the Royal Household is beginning to request the repeal of some lèse-majesté convictions, the future of the kingdom is being discussed by the people rather than the military elites. Panusaya Sithijirawattanakul, a prominent leader of the demonstrations, announced the ten demands for the reform of the monarchy on the August 10, 2020. The demands included overturning the lèse-majesté law, making the Crown Property Bureau more transparent, and for His Majesty to stop endorsing coups d'état (Sithijirawattanakul, 2020). The government's patience had lasted a long time, albeit on orders from the King, but the patience of both the government and the protesters began to wear thin, with tear gas and water cannons beginning to be deployed in the name of the Covid-19 National Emergency Decree.

### **Abusing the National Emergency Decree Act of 2005**

For the Royal Thai Government to maintain a low rate of transmission of Covid-19, the National Emergency Decree Act of 2005 was invoked to allow closing borders to tourists, closing public spaces, and restricting gatherings. To allow authorities to provide accurate information, the Prime Minister announced in late March 2020 that it was now a punishable offence to share “fake news or news without apparent sources” (Office of the Prime Minister, 2020, p. 3). Initially vital in ensuring the dissemination of factual information about the spread and dangers of Covid-19, this decree later led to questions about what the government would consider fake news and if these stories would only apply to Covid-19- related articles. As the government kept extending the Emergency Decree, it became clear that its desire to disperse gatherings was not meant to limit the transmission and spread of Covid-19 but to try to stop people from continuing to protest against the government's actions, as many had been doing for the past six years.

The history of Thai censorship of journalists, human rights activists, and demonstrations is a dark one, and the nation continues to lead in failing to acknowledge freedom of expression. Given that various institutions, including Human Rights Watch, United Nations, and Amnesty International, are concerned and alarmed about the crackdown on critics of the government, Covid-19 has presented an opportunity for authorities to silence opposition. Gatherings that have occurred with political intentions have been quickly shut down, despite mask wearing and temperature controls. In response to these political gatherings, the police “arrested prominent pro-democracy activists Anurak Jeantawanich and Tosaporn Serirak” (HRW, 2020) for being members of the Red Shirt movement<sup>2</sup> and demanding justice for those killed in the 2010 protests. These arrests were made in May 2020 as the government extended the Emergency Decree, at a time when the number of deaths to date remained only 57, and that of cases, 3,081 (MOPH, 2020), at the end of that month. The extension of the decree was widely considered unjustified and unnecessary, given that the threat of Covid-19 had by then already been significantly reduced. This led the government to provide domestic tourism stimulus grants, while retaining draconian measures banning political gatherings, measures that ultimately failed and led to greater demonstrations.

As the protests restarted after failing to influence the government with respect to LGBTQ+ rights, socio-economic security, and greater institutional reforms, the monarchy was next in line to be attacked. The *lèse-majesté* law had not been invoked for around three years, when it began being used at the height of tensions between the government and the Royal Household on the one hand, and the protestors on the other. Her Majesty Queen Suthida was being driven to Dusit Palace, when the route used took her and her entourage past the protests that included the use of the three-finger salute adapted from ‘The Hunger Games’ films. The Police were asked why Queen Suthida was taken along this route, in full acknowledgement that it would mean passing protestors, with some Thais questioning “whether the encounter was used to justify a crackdown” (Tostevin et al, 2020). After this historic moment in the protests, the government increased its enforcement of the emergency decrees, claiming that protestors had committed serious offenses against national security, particularly concerning Queen Suthida. This led to two activists being arrested “on charges of violence against the Queen, which can carry a death sentence” (Tostevin et al., 2020). Emergency laws were

2 This is a political movement against the coup d'état against then-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

reinstated and political gatherings of five people or more were made illegal; yet, this did not deter the demonstrators. Anger on the streets grew, with more people coming out to protest in a way that Thailand had never seen.

Since King Vajiralongkorn had requested that no more *lèse-majesté* charges be made, the government arrested 100 protestors on charges of “illegal assembly, violating Covid-19-related restrictions, and sedition” (HRW, 2021). Initial reluctance to use the controversial law to comply with the King’s request yielded to riot police asserting authoritarian control. After the incident with Queen Suthida’s being surrounded by demonstrators, the government authorised the use of tear gas and water cannons to stifle political dissent across Bangkok. His patience having run out, Prayut Chan-o-Cha re-enabled *lèse-majesté* prosecutions after a three-year hiatus. More protestors, including children, were charged for insulting the monarchy. To prove to demonstrators that Article 112 of the penal code was still in force, the longest sentence for a *lèse-majesté* crime was handed to former civil servant Ms. Anachan Preeleert on January 19, 2021. Tried initially in a military court, Ms. Anachan Preeleert was given 87 years in prison, which was later “halved when she confessed to the alleged violations” (OHCHR, 2021). This signal created fears that the military might impose a coup on to put an end to protests and further repress political discussion in the already fractious kingdom.

The Emergency Decree has been used at least ten times since the initial lockdown in March 2020, and Prayut Chan-o-Cha may have begun to feel pushed against the wall. He survived a second no-confidence vote in February 2021, over the misuse of power to promote police officials, and the mishandling the economy, among other allegations. With the most serious allegation being Prayut’s having caused a deepening of the divisions in the society and “using the monarchy as a shield against criticism of his government” (Ekvithayavechnukul, 2021). Former MP and leader of Future Forward Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit is being investigated for *lèse-majesté* after criticising the government’s Covid-19 vaccination program for providing a contract to Siam Bioscience, which he called a “subsidiary of the Crown Property Bureau, [lacking] vaccine-making experience” (Ratcliffe, 2021). Thanathorn’s supporters claim that he is being used in a political stunt to silence opposition to the government by making reasonable points concerning the sluggish vaccination program in Thailand. The use of the monarchy to shield Chan-o-Cha may reveal that his time as Prime Minister is almost up, and that once Covid-19 has been controlled in the kingdom through the

vaccination rollout, it may be able to move forward, without a further abuse of emergency powers, to harass political figures and carry out reforms in a suitable manner that restores and retains democracy as a functional institutional pillar in a country that relies on an aristocracy to sustain its institutions.

## Conclusion

Given the threat of Covid-19, it was surely right for governments to exercise greater authority to deal with the spread and transmission of the virus, in order to protect public health. However, this could, and did, cause democracy to suffer in states that were already politically unstable. Thailand has always been a site of major political tensions, and the pandemic has exacerbated them. Prayut Chan-o-Cha's government was initially successful in dramatically slowing the spread of the pandemic and maintaining a low death rate, but his failed promises since ousting former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra are the reason why the demonstrations during his premiership have reached new heights. Relations between the monarchy and military may soon become fractious, on account of the Prime Minister. Under his leadership, Chan-o-Cha has accidentally put the monarchy under great scrutiny by protesters, and despite surviving two no-confidence votes, his government has resorted to *lèse-majesté* laws to protect the government despite King Vajiralongkorn's request not to do so.

The extension of the Emergency Decree has not been used to defeat Covid-19, but to try and disperse crowds pushing for his government's resignation and reforms moving in the direction of liberal democracy. State of emergency laws have been used to target political activists who seem to threaten his premiership, and through this targeting, to repress political change and dialogue. Thailand's political conflict has long been between two factions, the Red and Yellow Shirts, but until recently has not seen demonstrations presenting a united front against the government. The junta ensured that its election victory and mandate for constitutional changes were legitimate, but, given the power of the National Council for Peace and Order in the Senate, real change in the kingdom can only happen with a new constitution, and in a way contrary to the undemocratic interventions of His Majesty the King. As the vaccination programme begins (as of this writing) in Thailand, a global light at the end of the tunnel is appearing for the end of the pandemic. With cases remaining steady and deaths categorically low, the course of Covid-19 in Thailand has not been as catastrophic towards public



health in as it has been with some Western nations. Through effective communication and swift action, Thailand has been able to control the pandemic, with domestic tourism helping to restart the economy and indications that the government will reopen its borders to those with a vaccine passport. But in this volatile period of Thai democracy, it is vital for Prayut Chan-o-Cha to avoid any abuses of power that might be committed in the name of public health.

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# 9

## ON MANAGING DEVELOPMENT IN THE ERA OF COVID-19: THE CASE OF JORDAN

*Naema Jannath*

### **Abstract**

The impact of Covid-19 on the Middle East has been uneven. Rich Persian Gulf nations, including the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait, have used their resources to manage the pandemic. Jordan, poorer and with nearly half of its population refugees, has had to deal with it with limited financial resources. This article assesses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Jordanian development. It examines the implication of COVID-19 on various sectors of the economy, including micro-businesses, as well as the nation's soaring unemployment levels and decrease in economic output.

### **Introduction**

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is the third major crisis to hit the Middle East in a decade, following the uproar of the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings and the start of oil price declines in 2014 (Gavlak, 2020). Jordan was one of the few states that engaged a strict COVID-19 response in the Middle East, which explains why there have been fewer deaths, compared to other Middle Eastern states, such as Iran. This article will assess how the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has impacted Jordan and its development. This will be done through exploring the different types of development: economic, political, and social. In terms of economic development, I will look at the pandemic's impact on different sectors of the economy, including micro-businesses, as well as soaring unemployment levels, and a decrease in economic output. Political development will be examined in terms of the current instability in the conflicts involving Israel, Palestine, and Jordan, caused by the Trump administration, as well as the ongoing political tensions between Jordan's government and its citizens. In terms of social development, I will look at the pandemic's effects in terms of its immense impact on

vulnerable groups in society, including Syrian refugees, and women and children. I will also discuss the healthcare system, which evidently is the weakest piece in Jordanian society today. Broadly, I will argue that, while Jordan has been able to limit the number of cases, COVID-19 has significantly impacted its development.

### **Development as a contested concept**

Development is a simple concept: the progress, change, or even growth of a country. But on what basis is it evaluated: economic, political, social, or environmental? (Hopper, 2012; Desai, 2014; Haslam, Shafer & Beaudet, 2017). Indeed, it is a contested concept in either capitalist or socialist society. The predominance of the capitalist system worldwide encouraged Third World societies to develop away from a traditional feudal model towards a much modernized society, in which the industrial and service sectors dominate (Dogan, 2020). The capitalist system has shown that despite being a strong catalyst in bringing development through a profit-based economy, this development is rather inherently unequal (Muller, 2013). This is further highlighted by the ownership of wealth in Middle Eastern nations, with the top 1 per cent accruing 23 per cent of the nation's total wealth (World Inequality Lab, 2020). In general, in these societies, those who possess a large degree of political influence also are the ones with the most wealth. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has been critiqued as an inaccurate average for representing a country's development, as it does not take into consideration other aspects of development, such as income, education, or health (Kapoor and Debroy, 2019). The Human Development Index (HDI) was introduced to fill this gap, and is often considered alongside GDP when assessing a country's relative level of development. In recent years, economic development in the Middle East has exceeded, through its oil reserves, technological advancement, improvement of infrastructure, and other features of economic development generally.

When it comes to development in the Middle East, despite the progress achieved, it has been uneven, and this is reflected in Jordan's economy involving unequal distribution, not only between the women and men of the country generally, but between Jordanian natives and the Syrian refugee population as well. Given that the Hashemite Kingdom has an extensive amount of debt, it did not have an abundance of approaches to choose from (World Bank, 2020). Thus, Jordan's pre-existing problems and its limited capacity to deal with them lay behind the lived experience of the lockdown.

## Development in Jordan

Jordan initially consisted of the desert or semi-desert territory east of the Jordan River, inhabited largely by people of Bedouin tribes (Library of Congress, 2006). The lack of arable land means that Jordan has very little agricultural output, and its population is concentrated around the northern region of the Jordan River Valley. Its economy has depended partly on the export of fertiliser, thanks to its containing high quantities of phosphates and potassium (Heckenmüller et al., 2014).

However, it is generally a resource-poor nation, and is among the countries with the least crude oil and natural gas reserves (World Bank, 2016). For this reason, unlike its neighbours, Jordan relies heavily for income on the tourism industry, which generated \$7.2 billion in revenue in 2019, equivalent to 17 per cent of the nation's GDP, according to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD, 2020). This loss of this revenue due to the pandemic severely impacted an industry that employs over 53,000 people. It is unknown how many of these people lost their jobs or were furloughed. The EBRD report describes how over 95 per cent of businesses in the tourism sector are small and mid-sized (SMEs), with employees typically carrying out more than one function; thus, losing a single employee can have a cascade of negative effects on a business.

Most Jordanians are Muslims; they make up 82 per cent of the population, of whom 93 percent are Sunni (Congressional Research Service, 2020). The largest minority religious groups are Christians, making up 2.2 per cent of the population, Buddhists at 0.4 per cent, and Hindus at 0.1 per cent. Palestinian refugees make up over one-fifth of the population, with over 2 million Palestinians residing in Jordan as of 2019 (UNRWA, 2019). Since 2011 Jordan has also provided refuge to 1.3 million Syrians, following the Syrian Civil war. Refugees make up over a quarter of the Jordanian population, putting immense pressure on Jordanian authorities and the country's already scarce resources. Many of the Syrian refugees have still yet to be registered with the UNHCR (JRP, 2020). Overall, the population of Jordan is over 10 million, with an average life expectancy at age 75 (Worldmeter, 2021).

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is ranked 110<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of its GDP per capita (Jensehaugen, 2020). Jordan's limited resources may explain why it organized a larger response to the pandemic crisis compared to other states in the Middle East. Before the pandemic, Jordan already faced some series obstacles



economically as well as socially: 15.7 per cent of the Jordanian population and 78 per cent of the country's Syrian population lived under the poverty line (UN-HCR, 2020), and the unemployment rate was at 19.1 per cent already (PIRO, 2020). Youth unemployment before the pandemic was quite high as well, with 40.1 per cent without a source of income (Congressional Research Service, 2020).



## Geopolitical Situation

A political challenge to consider is the instability caused by the Trump administration with respect to the Palestinian people in the territories occupied by Israel (Congressional Research Service, 2020). The Trump administration was advocating the annexation of Palestinian-occupied territory and recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel (Amnesty, 2017). This led to a souring of the relationship between Jordan and Israel, and has strongly affected the Jordan-Israeli Peace agreement, with Jordan being caught between the Trump Administration and the Palestinian Authority (Congressional Research Service, 2020). Jordan regards the return of the occupied territories as a criterion for maintaining the Jordanian-Israeli Peace agreement. Thus, the continued expansion of the occupied

territories, especially those in the Jordan Valley, is viewed as a significant threat to Jordanian national security, undermining future prospects of reclaiming that land for Palestinian refugees.

From the map above we can see that Jordan is bordered by Syria and Iraq on its northern and north-western border, respectively, and the West Bank on its western border. From this map, it is not difficult to see why Jordan has been the destination of numerous refugees from across Palestine, Syria and Iraq. Following the Israeli Occupation of the West Bank, so many Palestinians fled to Jordan that Palestinians are now in fact the majority in Jordan. What arises from this imbalance is a situation where 6.7 million Jordanian citizens do not regard themselves as subjects of the ruler of the Hashemite kingdom. This instability is compounded by the recent influx of Iraqi and Syrian refugees, which put an additional strain on the already limited resources. A situation where Palestinians are unable to return to their homeland could be catastrophic for Jordan (Marshall, 2016).

With the pandemic looming over the Jordanian government's head, with limited healthcare resources, the risk in which this places the Palestinians in the Jordan Valley, for themselves and the rest of the country, should undoubtedly be at the forefront of its COVID response policy. It may be seen that Israel has retained a lax attitude towards public criticism from Jordan, as there seems to be a high level of private cooperation between the two countries revolving around matters of national security (Landau, 2020). The political challenge that this problem presents may be difficult to address or resolve while the Jordanian government is trying to focus on dealing with the global pandemic. It may also create a window of opportunity for the US or Israel to use their coercive influence.

### **Implications of Covid-19**

The coercive approach adopted has invited some political challenges. For instance, there are debates regarding the restrictions on political freedom through curfews and harsh penalties, which were implemented after Jordan announced a state of emergency on March 19, when 69 cases were confirmed (Brookings Doha Centre, 2020). The reason for this was to allow for the tracking and tracing of patients, and further encourage social distancing (Khatatbeh, 2020). Given the tension and distrust that have existed between the government and its citizens since the 2011 Arab Spring, it is understandable that many citizens were not happy

with the strict curfews and penalties. It should be considered that this is a strategy carried out by the government to harness the political power it lost after the earlier riots. However, 71 per cent of the population believes that the activation of the defence law and the curfew came at the right time (Hartnett, 2020). This demonstrates that Jordan's citizens are content with the sacrificing of their rights and freedoms to ensure the safety of everyone, something that reflects a social contract theoretical framework.

As with any other country, the economic challenges that the pandemic brought to Jordan were significant and affected its development to a large extent. On a micro level, many enterprises experienced huge losses of revenue due to reduced demand and sales, and were forced to either close their business or continue at less than full capacity (ILO, 2020). Owners who were able to take responsibility for full wages for their employees did so, but many only had the capacity to do so for the first couple of months (World Bank, 2020). A survey conducted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reported that more than 46 per cent of enterprises listed cash flow problems and 30 per cent problems of access to transport when discussing current obstacles to their business (Kebede et al., 2020). Cash flow problems can be pressurizing during a pandemic and can thus lead to bankruptcies. Transport problems can be an issue for certain businesses in the garment manufacturing sector, especially for women who most likely do not have the financial means to own their own car. It is important to acknowledge the important part that enterprises play in Jordan's development, as, through innovation and entrepreneurship, they have provided income to many people in Jordan. This is despite the many challenges that small and large businesses have been facing due to COVID-19.

Also, many sectors of the Jordanian economy have faced losses due to restrictions placed by the government, beginning very early on in the pandemic. Agriculture in Jordan, for instance, is mainly made up of informal workers who do not have official contracts or hours. This means that many do not have a valid license to allow them to work in farming, a fact that has created a labour shortage (Raouf et al., 2020), impacting food production costs, future harvests, and overall food security. Labour shortages can be a problem in Jordan's already weak labour market, as they can lead to further unemployment and under-employment among Syrians and Jordanians (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2020), and that part of the labour force made up largely of women. Another heavily affected

sector was tourism, due to the limitations placed on movement, and the closing of airports, which evidently led to the cancellation of holiday bookings not just in Jordan but across the Middle Eastern region. In fact, demand for hotels was cut by 85 per cent (Raouf et al, 2020). This led to job losses yet again, and as the Chairman of the Jordan Inbound Tour Operators Association (JITOA) stated in an interview, up to 40,000 jobs may have been lost in the sector (Kebede et al., 2020). The textile and garment industries were cut back by 15 per cent, brought by a decrease in both domestic and foreign demand, leading to huge disruption in the global supply chains (Elsabbagh et al., 2020). This led to garment exports hitting a low point in April, with a drop of 45 million USD, compared to April 2019 (Better Work, 2020).

However, firms in some sectors were able to increase their production by as much as 20 per cent (Raouf et al, 2020), such as the chemical industry, which was able to take advantage of the export restrictions in other Middle Eastern countries, and the technology sector, which benefitted from the demand for internet services, such as remote working or e-learning. In this and other respects, Jordan has been able to benefit from the low prices of oil as it imports the majority of its energy.

The external and internal shocks from different sectors of the economy led to a clear decrease in economic output. Having strong output consistently increases overall economic growth, which is important for a country's development; however, during the pandemic, Jordan's real quarterly GDP declined; it fell by 22.6 percent in the second quarter of 2020 (Elsabbagh et al., 2020). This decline was mainly driven by that in the tourism, agriculture, and industrial sectors, which have all been affected by numerous COVID-19- related inconveniences. As previously mentioned, the agriculture sector suffered from a labour shortage, which was reflected in a substantial decline in the production of fruits, vegetables, and other crops. This undoubtedly had an impact on Jordan's food system, creating a loss of almost 40 per cent (Raouf et al., 2020). A food system disruption can lead to a rise in food prices, which, coupled with a decline in household income, could be disastrous.

On top of all this, the reduced working hours and redundancies would undoubtedly have effects in Jordan on household income. The average monthly household income before the pandemic was approximately USD 519; after the lockdown commenced, this decreased to approximately USD 303 (ILO, 2020). This means

that workers and their families have less disposable income to spend on rent and food, and maintaining their overall well-being. Households were also affected by lower remittances from abroad (Raouf et al., 2020); these are among the main sources that make up Jordan's foreign currency reserves. The Jordan Strategy Forum, a local NGO, reported that remittances contributed to around 8 percent of Jordan's GDP in 2014 (Werman, 2020). Remittance funds from work opportunities in the Gulf states have helped in countering the already low employment levels and reducing the pressure on Jordan's labour market as well (Jordan Strategy Forum, 2018). In the first two months of the pandemic, remittances fell by 10 percent, as many Jordanians working in Gulf countries were laid off (Reuters, 2020). Thus, one of the economic challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic was loss of income in a country that relies on remittances for part of its economic growth.

The socio-economic impact on some of Jordan's vulnerable groups in society has been immense. Women tend to work in the health and education sectors, which are the most at risk of spreading the virus. They also have the responsibility of taking care of ill family members, older people, and children (UN, 2020), which can further jeopardize their own health. In a study by UN Women (2020), 24 per cent said that they could not access their nearest health care facility and 34 per cent that they could not obtain medicines. The persistence of inequality in the distribution of household duties has played a noticeable role in the pandemic, despite Jordan's prioritising gender equality as among its Sustainable Development Goals. Women also have unequal access to technology, information, awareness, and training opportunities (UN, 2020). Another significant circumstance to take into account is the prevalence of gender-based violence. In fact, 62 per cent of women respondents indicated that they feel at increased risk of suffering physical or psychological violence (UN Women, 2020). The greater the number of people living in the same household, the greater the chance has been of violent tensions during the lockdown. Therefore, these vulnerable women face challenges on multiple grounds, which further aggravate the constraints on women that were present before the pandemic.

Another vulnerable group that has suffered during the pandemic are Syrian refugees. Before the pandemic, many Syrians were already working in the informal sector, settling for low wages and poor working conditions, due to their limited working rights, as they often are not permitted to work legally. A telephone survey

carried out by the International Labour Organization (2020) stated that 37 per cent of Syrian women were employed in the construction sector and 41 per cent in manufacturing centres. This is evidently challenging for the Syrian refugee population, as both of these sectors were heavily impacted by COVID-19; there was a 15 percent decline in construction and manufacturing due to restrictions on the movements of workers, the necessity for social distancing, and other cautionary measures (UN Jordan, 2020). There was also adverse pressure on refugees' household income, with 95 per cent reporting a loss thereof (ILO, 2020). There is also a health impact that must be acknowledged, as refugees are concentrated in camps and poor urban settings that are often crowded, with poor infrastructure and hygiene, placing them at risk for COVID-19 outbreaks (UN, 2020). This population pattern meant that Jordan was at risk of being a high-spread country (Jensehaugen, 2020). There is also the problem, affecting the many children who make up 34 per cent of the refugee population (UN Jordan, 2020), of unequal access to educational opportunities, in part due to child labour. This inequality is clearly manifest with e-learning (UNICEF, 2020). Thus, in many ways vulnerable Syrian refugees face circumstances that aggravate further the constraints on them that were present before the pandemic.

Lastly, when looking at development, it is important to consider the healthcare system and access within it, problems in this area also being exacerbated in the context of the pandemic. Given Jordan's strict approach to the crisis from very early on, by June 2020 the country had had only 9 deaths (June 2020) in a population of 10 million, and not a single reported case of COVID-19 among the country's Syrian refugee population (Jensehaugen, 2020). Jordan is regarded as having a weak healthcare system, with some people finding it difficult to access medical aid and hospital beds. Thus, the low number of cases compared to other states does not reflect an advanced state of healthcare, technologically or otherwise, but rather the government's ability to coerce its people. In fact, the World Health Organization (WHO) ranked Jordan's health care system as one of the least prepared for a pandemic (Jensehaugen, 2020). The country's water scarcity does not help either, given that hygiene is the topmost priority in keeping this virus at bay. Jordan's renewable water supply currently only meets about half of the population's water demands (USAID, 2020). Another environmental strain to be considered is the large amount of medical waste from treating patients (WHO, 2020). Thus, COVID-19 has not affected the healthcare sector heavily, but it

was spared at the cost of the economy. The environmental impacts, which were already apparent, also had an effect on sustainable development.

## Conclusion

The Coronavirus pandemic has affected Jordan's development in many ways. In order to understand its impact on economic development, this article looked at different sectors of the economy, the labour market, and household income. Evidently, the largest impact has been economic, and this is certain to contribute to new levels of poverty and unemployment rates in the months to come, with Jordan's most prominent industry, tourism, being most significantly affected. As mentioned earlier, this sector generated 17 percent of the country's revenue in 2019. This lost revenue had a knock-on effect on all of the other industries in Jordan. Political development was affected in terms of a turning away from democracy towards more right-wing government, with the state relying on its coercive apparatus much as it had done before the Arab Spring uprisings. The impact on vulnerable groups in civil society is important to acknowledge when looking at development, as these groups are not well represented in the government or economic elites, yet are the most affected by the pandemic. A truly progressive society will benefit all of its minorities. Lastly, the health impact, which was discussed briefly, suggests that this industry was little affected, but what the data covers up is the lack of resources that Jordan has and how ill-equipped it has been to combat the virus. Overall, this pandemic has had a long-lasting effect on Jordan's development, and the government still needs to find an effective strategy to combat it.

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PART **III**

**ECONOMIC CHALLENGES OF COVID-19**



# 10

## UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME AND UNIVERSAL BASIC SERVICES: A NEW SOCIAL GUARANTEE

*Ibrahim Seedat*

### **Abstract**

The devastating impact of the virus on almost every aspect of everyday life have been felt by governments, businesses, households, and individuals. As countries worldwide witnessed contractions in economic growth and productivity, economic intervention by governments was quickly acknowledged to be essential and inevitable. The covid pandemic crisis shone a light on the vulnerabilities of citizens and has highlighted the glaring lack of protection and safety nets many individuals face across the world. The current crisis has led to an increased interest in universal basic income and universal basic services among policymakers, think tanks, and politicians alike. Universal basic income, despite the increase in interest in it recently in policy-making circles, can be traced back as early as ancient Athens. While the term has evolved over centuries, the general model of a universal basic income has remained. As an alternative policy to universal basic income, universal basic services is a policy idea born in the last decade of Conservative party rule in the United Kingdom. This article presents a theoretical and historical overview of the two policies. It puts forth the case for implementing both policies to provide emergency relief as governments attempt to mitigate the devastating impact of the Covid crisis.

### **Introduction**

This article seeks to examine two new policies that have gained traction in recent years, Universal Basic Income (UBI) and Universal Basic Services (UBS). Both policies have gained traction as the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak have become more apparent. The purpose of this article is to, firstly, provide an overview of what the two programs are and what is the rationale that their advocates use, and, secondly, argue for the implementation of *both* universal basic income

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and universal basic services. While the two types of policy seek to address different sets of issues, I argue that if implemented together, they have enormous transformative power in both an immediate material sense and in their ability to provide individuals with the provisions to improve their own socio-economic reality.

The article is arranged in two sections. The first section defines universal basic income and universal basic services, particularly highlighting the rationale advocates use for each. The second part of section one traces the historical and theoretical map behind the two policies and ultimately argues that the history of the basic income idea depends on what term is used to describe it. In addition, I argue that universal basic services are born out of specific political and socio-economic conditions, which have arisen in the UK since the 2010 election and during the subsequent decade of Conservative Party rule. In the second section, I argue in favour of implementing both a universal basic income and a universal basic services policy to mitigate the catastrophic effects of the COVID-19 outbreak and the global pandemic. In sum, I argue that while the two policies address different issues, such as the need for immediate financial support versus the extension of the already existing social welfare model, both policies can improve individuals' lives both short- and long-term.

### **1.1 Defining Universal Basic Income and Universal Basic Services**

According to the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN, 2019), UBI can be defined as “an income unconditionally granted to all on an individual basis, without means testing or work requirements.” As mentioned above, the concept is contested, and so definitions vary in their details. For example, Belgian philosopher Philippe Van Parijs (2000), who remains an active proponent and defender of the concept of a basic income, defines UBI differently: “an income paid by government, at a uniform level and at regular intervals, to each adult member of society. The grant is paid, and its level is fixed, irrespective of whether the person is rich or poor, lives alone or with others, is willing to work or not” (p. 5). We can see how some definitions may be narrow and therefore require more clarification regarding recipients and timing of payments; for example, per annum or every month. In contrast, other definitions provide a clear and in-depth definition of the concept. Despite the definitions and features of the concept differing, all variations of the definitions contain five basic elements (BIEN, 2019):

- **Unconditional:** The only condition attached would be the age of the recipient. Everyone of the same age would receive an income, regardless of age, gender, employment status, willingness to work, family structure, contribution to society, housing costs, or anything else.
- **Automatic:** The income would be paid automatically at regular intervals (for example, monthly or weekly) and not as a one-off grant.
- **Universal:** The income would be paid to all, without means-testing.
- **Individual:** The basic income would be paid on an individual basis rather than based on household income.
- **Cash payment:** The income would be paid in the appropriate medium (cash, bank transfer, etc.). Individuals could decide what they will spend their money on. This is opposed to vouchers for a specific use, such as food and services.

The Palgrave International Handbook of Basic Income (2019) defines UBI as:

an unconditional, non-withdrawable income paid to every legally resident individual within a particular jurisdiction; and it is assumed that the Basic Incomes will be regular, periodic payments (with payments at least once a month); that the incomes will be paid in cash, normally into bank or similar accounts; that the incomes will be permanent; that people of different ages might receive different amounts; and that levels might be updated annually.

I will be using this definition as it is the most comprehensive and contains all of the five elements mentioned above in the definition.

Universal Basic Services (UBS), on the other hand, has a clear definition. The concept is relatively new compared to UBI and has not been under the same scrutiny as UBI. The name of the concept was signposted initially as an alternative policy to UBI. The official Universal Basic Services website (2020) defines UBS as: “the provision of sufficient free public services, as can be afforded from a reasonable tax on incomes, to enable every citizen’s safety, opportunity, and participation.” Generally, the concept is seen as an extension of the welfare state model to include other services vital to human development and reduce financial and social inequalities. These services can include housing, food security, healthcare, education, transport, information, and legal aid (Portes et al., 2017). For a service to be included as a UBS provision, it must meet at least one of the following conditions:

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- It is necessary to maintain an individual's, or society's, material safety;
- it is necessary to enable an individual's personal efforts to utilise their skills and abilities to contribute to their communities and society; or
- it is necessary to enable individuals to participate in the political system(s) in which they live.

The table below illustrates rationales used for the inclusion of particular services in the UBS definition:

UBS Inclusion Rationales			
UBS	Material Safety	Opportunity	Participation
Shelter	X		
Sustenance	X		
Health Care	X		
Education		X	X
Transport		X	X
Information		X	X
Legal	X	X	X

*Source: Portes et al., 2017*

The strength of UBS lies in the definition and application of the idea. Unlike money transfers, public services cannot be interchanged, and this includes UBI, which essentially leaves people with the agency to spend the income on whatever they want. However, substantial economic restructuring is required for both policies to be implemented, and this is particularly the case in terms of how corporations are taxed and funds are redistributed.

**1.2 Historical and theoretical context of Universal Basic Income and Universal Basic Services**

Historically, the concept of UBI has been given different meanings, depending on the terms used to define it. For example, if we use the term ‘universal demogrant’, another name for the Basic Income concept, its origins can be traced back to ancient Athens (Widerquist, 2019, p. 30). The city used revenue generated from a city-owned mine to redistribute a small cash income to Athenian citizens. This

can be interpreted as a form of Basic Income. However, the term ‘citizens’ had a different meaning back then – it excluded slaves and women, and noncitizens were not eligible for the Basic Income. Since a basic income for a few people is not universal income, it cannot be described as a basic income.

The modern interpretation of a state-run basic income dates back as early as the mid-sixteenth century. Thomas More’s *Utopia* describes a society where every person receives a guaranteed income (Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017, p. 51). However, More’s notion of a basic income depends on work, and his account can more accurately be described as leading to the modern social welfare movement. The political crisis that ensued during and after the French Revolution, more than 250 years after the publication of *Utopia*, encouraged republican ideals and radical egalitarianism. Radical thinkers, such as Montesquieu and Robespierre, based their support for the basic income concept on an individual’s right to existence (Morley-Fletcher, 1980, pp. 297-300, cited in King et al., 2006). This caused alarm and widespread panic among those higher up in the social and political structures (King and Marangos, 2006), as the existing social order was on the brink of collapse. The French Revolution asserted the universal ‘Rights of Man’ and raised more philosophical questions, such as how can poverty be justified in terms of divine law and human reason? Around this time, radical thinkers such as Thomas Paine and Thomas Spence began to tackle these questions. Both advocated a welfare system that guaranteed all citizens a basic income. Paine (1797) and Spence (2000) were the first to propose models of a modern Basic Income. Paine’s pamphlet *Agrarian Justice* argued that people should be compensated out of taxes collected on land rents due to private ownership of land, which stopped people from hunting, fishing, and farming on their own account. However, his proposal stipulated that the compensation should be in the form of a large cash grant plus a regular cash pension payment at retirement age. Spence took the argument further and called for increasing taxes on land and an unconditional, regular cash income: this was the first appearance of Basic Income proper.

Another way of tracing the origins of the Basic Income idea is looking at the dynamics of hunter-gatherer societies. Widerquist and McCall (2017) suggest that the first working model of Basic Income came from this prehistoric period of human history. First, land and its produce were seen as common property, in that everyone was free to hunt on the land, but no one could own it. Though this practice was rarely seen in large-scale communities with integrated economies, small-scale



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agrarian communities upheld this principle in Europe until the nineteenth century. Land in this context can be interpreted as a form of Basic Income, as everyone was allowed to benefit from the land and its produce to survive. Secondly, individuals had access to the land and resources needed for survival. Any excess food and other commodities were to be shared immediately with the collective. Therefore, food can be seen as a form of Basic Income. Despite hunter-gatherer societies forming thousands of years ago, there is corroborating evidence, as Widerquist and McCall (2017) highlight, to suggest that these two practices are still prevalent in modern and complex societies.

The history of Basic Income has experienced a succession of waves, with each wave building on the work of the previous one. The first wave took place almost two hundred years ago. Its advocates achieved little and failed to influence policy-makers and legislation. The middle and end of World War Two, followed by the subsequent rebuilding nations, saw radical changes to social policy, especially in Western democracies. The Beveridge Report (1942) laid the foundation for creating the welfare state in the United Kingdom, and highlights the radical nature of policies. This conditional model was always there to aid those fitting a need category, such as the old, sick, disabled, and unemployed.

In the second wave, the idea was kept alive as a focus of academic interest on the part of economists who were interested in theoretical alternatives to the existing welfare system, even though the concept fell out of mainstream political discourse (Widerquist, 2019, p. 34). The second wave was characterised by other quasi-forms of Basic Income such as the Negative Income Tax (NIT) and Minimum Income Guarantee. NIT was essential for the Basic Income movement, as it directed international attention to imagining and creating a world in which everyone would be above the poverty level. Social welfare activists such as Martin Luther King also argued in favour of some kind of Basic Income. Economists such as Milton Friedman (1968) and James Tobin (1968) supported the NIT because it represented a more cost-effective approach to poverty than existing conditional programmes such as work tests. NIT was seen as simplifying the welfare system in the true neoclassical sense while making it more inclusive (Widerquist, 2019, p. 35). By the 1980s, during the neoliberal epoch, politicians such as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan changed the conversation surrounding the welfare state system. Recipients were now vilified and seen as leeches and frauds. As a result, all talk of expanding the welfare system and improving it came to a grinding

halt. What followed was a period spanning thirty years in which Basic Income, NIT, and Minimum Income Guarantee effectively disappeared from mainstream political discourse (Widerquist and Sheahan, 2012).

The last decade of the twentieth century saw a flurry of discussions and proposals around various forms of Basic Income and how they could be implemented. These discussions took place mainly outside of mainstream politics and in academic and activist circles. By the mid-2000s, academic debates grew substantially, and organisations such as the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN) finally became mainstream in 2015 following an increase in media attention. Furthermore, Andrew Yang's presidential campaign shed light on an already established global movement and kickstarted mainstream discussions on the need for a Basic Income. Meanwhile, developing countries had already implemented quasi-Basic Income policies such as Conditional Cash Transfers (CCT) programmes, particularly the Bolsa Familia in Brazil. The positive results from these programmes bolstered support for further steps towards Basic Income (Hanlon et al., 2010) and showed that a working model of Basic Income could be achieved. Economic inequality since the 1960s, coupled with technological advancements, created conditions ripe for introducing a Basic Income. High unemployment, the rise of the gig economy, and the relentless pace of automation all threatened to destabilise large sections of the labour force. Consequently, as the labour market became more unstable, activists, academics, tech entrepreneurs, and labour leaders proposed a Basic Income as an answer to changing employment market conditions (Bregman, 2017; Hughes, 2018; Yang, 2018).

In response to the growing interest in a Basic Income, an article published by Diane Coyle (2017) in the *Financial Times* first discussed the notion of Basic Services as an alternative to UBI. The first model of the feasibility and theoretical framework was published by the University College London's *Institute for Global Prosperity* in 2017 (Portes et al.). The report attracted the previous Labour Party leader, Jeremy Corbyn, and the policy would later be incorporated into the party's official platform (McDonnell, 2018). The proposal was initially coined Universal Basic Services to signpost an alternative policy to UBI, as this proposal addressed a different set of issues than UBI, which seeks to address immediate financial inequalities by distributing a regular cash income without work conditions or means-testing.

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In contrast, UBS aims to develop and improve existing public services by utilising the state welfare model, enabling individuals to utilise provisions according to their own needs and requirements. For example, the National Health Service (NHS) and state education are quasi-forms of UBS. UBS goes one step farther and includes the extension of other provisions, such as shelter, food, transport, information, and legal aid (Portes et al., 2017).

UBS can be considered a heterodox policy, as its theoretical foundations reject orthodox and neoclassical welfare economics. The proposal aims to unite everyday human needs through shared needs and collective responsibility instead of viewing an individual's needs in an atomised and single-minded approach, as is prevalent in traditional, orthodox welfare economics. In order to put forward a stronger case for UBS, I draw on the *Capability Approach*, first elaborated by Amartya Sen in 1985. The core characteristic of Sen's capability approach is the focus on what people can do and be; that is, on their capabilities. Sen's approach rejects traditional welfare economics, whose foundations lie in the utilitarian approach, particularly the classical Benthamite approach to utilitarianism (Alkire, 2009). This approach argues that an individual's most desirable action is what increases his or her psychological happiness and satisfaction. Thus, utility is a measure of a person's happiness or pleasure. Sen's approach views human well-being in terms of a range of opportunities and freedoms that people possess, rather than seeing people as utility maximising consumers. Capabilities are "the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for her to achieve." These are things that a person does and can do, such as being adequately nourished, being happy, having self-respect, and being able to participate in the community's life (Sen, 1999, p. 75). Unfortunately, Sen's description of this approach can be confusing, and the terms used can obscure the essence of what he argues. In contrast, Martha Nussbaum's capability approach lists ten cross-cultural human capabilities: life; bodily integrity; bodily health; senses, imagination, thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one's environment (Nussbaum, 2000). Nussbaum's list provides an excellent philosophical ground and framework while keeping a flexible space for defining specific contextual central capabilities. Using the capability approach, UBS can help policymakers and those in positions of power conceptualise and evaluate phenomena such as poverty, inequality, and well-being rather than just explaining them. In conjunction with other explanatory theories, UBS can begin to address the problems discussed above.

## 2. Why is there a need for a Universal Basic Income and Services?

### Emergency relief and basic income

The outbreak of COVID-19 led to an increase in positive discussions of Universal Basic Income in political and media circles (Nettle et al., 2020). In addition, a recent study by Nettle et al. (2020) revealed that support for UBI was significantly higher during the pandemic than it had been at other times. The study also revealed that those leaning right on the political spectrum showed a more significant shift in favour of UBI. However, it is essential to note that this shift reflects the fact that more right-wing people have generally been less supportive of UBI. In this section, I will be discussing the United Kingdom's response to the pandemic to formulate my argument.

The virus is currently on course to be as big a shock to the UK economy as the 2007-08 financial crisis. The Office for Budget Responsibility recently suggested that real national income would fall by approximately a third in the second quarter of 2020. It also suggested that public sector net borrowing would increase to roughly 14 per cent of national income. This would lead to the highest annual deficit since the second world war (Office for Budget Responsibility, 2020). One way to mitigate the economic effects of the crisis is for the call for a Universal Basic Income to be implemented. Supporters of the policy, such as Guy Standing, advocate it because it would help people deal with the economic effects of the pandemic (2020).

Sceptics on Universal Basic Income have started to rethink their position as the current economic situation worsens (Bush, 2020). The logic behind this is simple; the global pandemic presents the need for immediate and rapid relief. Targeted relief presents problems, and Universal Basic Income has the advantage of being simpler.

The government has taken this into account, and this can be seen in its response. For instance, the government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme provides employers with a taxable grant for furloughed employees. The grant is worth up to 80 per cent of the employee's wage and can be up to £2500 a month (Office for Budget Responsibility, 2020). Similarly, Donald Trump initiated a promising \$2 trillion federal government aid to aid businesses and households. In the American context, payments amounting to \$1200 per person and up to \$500 per child

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under 16 were made (Inland Revenue Service, 2020). The following two examples highlight some features of a basic income as they provide immediate income support to individuals. However, these measures are temporary, and there is no promise of regular cash payments once the crisis is over.

Research by Joyce and Xu (2020) suggests that low-paid workers are those affected the worst by the lockdown and the subsequent halt of economic activity. Their research finds that one-third of employees in sectors that have been shut down are in the bottom tenth of earnings, in contrast to the 5 per cent of those in the top tenth. Many households face a drastic fall in income. However, the critical difference is that poorer households cannot deal with drops as a large portion of the household budget is spent on essential items compared to wealthier households. Research by Crawford et al. (2020) shows that the poorest households spent approximately 55 per cent of their budgets on essential items, such as food and electricity.

In contrast, the wealthiest households spend approximately 39 per cent. This highlights how poorer households are in greater need of income support than wealthier households, especially in coping with COVID-19. However, it can be argued that this shows the necessity for targeted income support rather than a Universal Basic Income.

One of the fundamental objections to a basic income is the question of affordability. This argument may have credence in 'normal' times, but we are in extraordinary times, so affordability needs to be revisited once we return to 'normal'. Chancellor Rishi Sunak has dramatically increased public spending, deviating from the Conservative Party norm of the past two decades, with the Treasury (2020) reporting a support package for households and businesses amounting to £330 billion. The global pandemic has highlighted the need for public spending, with emergency relief as the immediate priority. It can be argued that previous arguments around affordability no longer have credibility. If we pursue this argument, the pandemic has shown how political choices primarily drive government spending, and so a Universal Basic Income, under these circumstances, may be considered affordable. However, the exceptional nature of the global pandemic means that this staggering spending has risen from a specific set of conditions, and it surely is unlikely to be repeated for some time after we return to normality. The financial crisis in 2007-08 and the decade that followed saw the

implementation of austerity policies. With the Conservative Party in government, similar economic choices would be made. This provides a much more depressing reading of the question of affordability of a Universal Basic Income. Perhaps the best prospect would be a limited emergency payment to support the poorest households, while activists and supporters of UBI build strategic alliances with policymakers and win the war of position.

Another objection to a Universal Basic Income is the belief that there are better proposals for alleviating poverty. Universal Basic Services is one proposed alternative. Public services have been regarded as essential in any modern economy (Prabhakar, 2020). As a result, a list of critical workers was drawn up by the government to keep some level of normality during the government-sanctioned lockdowns. These workers were permitted to travel to their place of work during the pandemic and lockdown. Key workers included those working in health services, the police; food supply; and utilities – gas, electric, and water (Cabinet Office and Department for Education, 2020).

Thus, there are calls for the welfare state to be rebuilt around universal basic services, which is argued by the *Institute for Global Prosperity* (Coote et al., 2017) at University College London. UBS incorporates seven core services into the existing social welfare model: healthcare, education; shelter/housing; food; transport; legal aid, and information (Coote et al., 2017). Some of the named services are already provided in the welfare state, such as the NHS and state education. So the additional services aim to be incorporated into the existing system. The inclusion of information services is also a promising idea. The Labour Party pledged that every home and business would receive free full-fibre broadband by 2030 by nationalising parts of British Telecom – namely its subsidiary, Openreach (BBC, 2019). The policy was ridiculed at the time by much of the media and public. To be sure, certain services that would be part of UBS are more valuable than others in dealing with the COVID-19. For example, healthcare, naturally, is an obvious priority. The government affirmed this by increasing spending for the NHS to help it cope with the virus. The NHS received a further £15.5 billion of funding (Office for Budget Responsibility, 2020).

As a more significant portion of the workforce works from home and this is coupled with schools closing, there is a greater need for information and access to the Internet. As a result, we can see how Labour's pledge had a grounding in the

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socio-economic reality of households across the country. It became evident incredibly early on that there is a 'digital divide' across the country, as some households have no Internet access at home (Prabhakar, 2020). In addition to people working from home, schools were closed before the official lockdown was announced. Modern education depends mainly on access to online classes and resources. Research by Lloyds Bank (2018) showed that in 2018, 700,000 11- to 18-year-olds had no access to the Internet at home through a computer or tablet. Furthermore, their capacity to work depends on having a connection and access to the internet for those working at home. Moreover, for the elderly, the Internet is a medium that is useful for maintaining social contacts through email and other forms of social media.

Thus, it can be argued that certain services and aspects of universal essential services are a greater priority at this moment than a Universal Basic Income. However, the case for emergency income relief to help people and businesses cope with the financial impact of COVID-19 remains pertinent. The question remains of the optimum mix of universal basic services and emergency income relief to mitigate the damage caused by the global pandemic.

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# 11

## ECONOMIC TRANSITION AND COVID-19 IN VIETNAM

*Rayan Haji*

### **Abstract**

Vietnam has gone through a significant economic transition since the 1980s. The country has recovered from the devastating impact of French colonialism and the war with the US, which ended in 1975. The economic reform, or Doi Moi, had become the crucial economic policy for Vietnamese development. This article will assess the economic development of Vietnam since the beginning of Doi Moi and the impact of Covid-19. The article is divided into two sections. In the first, I discuss Doi Moi. In the second section, I will assess the effects of Covid-19 on the economy and whether it signifies a break in development for the region.

### **Introduction**

“As long as there are people, there will be things” (Thoi, 2020). This is a Covid-19-era slogan used in Vietnam to represent the importance of unity and nationalism. This article will look at the economic transition in Vietnam since the decade of the 1980s and at the effects of Covid-19 since it first began in 2019. Vietnam has been one of the major success stories for tackling the virus since its outbreak in China in December 2019. The state has emerged as a key factor in managing the death toll, while from January 3, 2020 to April 22 2021, there were 2,812 confirmed cases of COVID-19, with 35 deaths, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO: 2021). It has not been without further cost, with economic growth declining since 2019. Before the virus outbreak, the original GDP growth forecast was 6.8%. If the coronavirus were to be contained by the second quarter of 2020, the GDP was expected to rise by just 6.09%. Agriculture would rise at a rate of 2.35% under the same situation, while the industry sector would develop at a rate of 7.1% and the services sector would increase at a rate of 6.47% (Statista: 2020: 33). This article is divided into two sections. While acknowledging the emergence of Doi Moi, it will look at the transition

in Vietnam's development and at what accounts for it, including with a review of a range of works in the literature. Following this, the second section will assess the impact of Covid-19 on the economy and whether it signifies a break in development for the region.

### **Vietnam: General Outlook**

Vietnam has not only gone through a regional reunification but an economic one, too. The consolidation of North and South Vietnam in 1975 under Communist rule signalled the call for extensive economic changes to be made. The notion began with the implementation of Doi Moi - a set of economic and political reforms that guided the country to becoming a more "socialist-oriented market economy" - which were strengthened after 1989 (Masina, 2006, p. 38). The state's implementation of a market economy can be argued as being due to previous development tactics not producing substantial results. In this regard, the market - along with its people - had suffered immensely. Henceforth, Vietnam has grown exponentially in economic, political, and social terms. Nonetheless, this literature review will address lingering questions such as: What is the driving factor for Vietnam's strive for success? How has Doi Moi contributed to the economic transition of Vietnam? What accounts for its transition? How has this transition differed from that of other East Asian countries? The hardships in Vietnam pre-Doi Moi resulted in high levels of unemployment, inflation, and economic downfall. Subsequently, it was only logical to introduce new reforms. Doi Moi encourages the privatization of businesses instead of state-owned enterprises, and foreign investments as well as liberalization of trade and domestic reforms. Despite the country's proceeding with capitalist ideologies, it still has what is very much a socialist economy. Against this background, this article will look at four main ways of analysing the success of its transition.

### **Development in Transition**

Decades of European expansion meant a new threat for Vietnam. Ultimately, it led to the acquisition of control by France over the state from 1883. The process of this happening was not smooth. This is because French political and economic policies blocked the emergence of a strong middle class and liberal political parties. Arguably, it drove nationalist movements to resort to revolutionary action in opposition. The resistance towards French colonialism began almost immediately

(Hall, 2010: 3-6). Against this backdrop, the United States sought to replace France in control of the country to prevent the strengthening of Communist influence and Soviet leaders. Through the Geneva Accords, the US successfully achieved the permanent political division of Vietnam by creating a non-Communist state in South Vietnam (Hall: 9). The objective of American containment to halt the spread of Communist ideology led to the Vietnam War, which started in 1955 and ended with the fall of Saigon in 1975.

The launching of Doi Moi signified a transitional future for Vietnam, proposing a 'socialist market economy'. The new strategies called for heightened autonomy for state-owned enterprises (SOEs), as well as a cutting back of government controls resulting in a rise in private commercial enterprises. Scholars would come to question the motives for this reform. The north was destitute – due to years of war and colonial corruption – and the system was in crisis and required restoration. In 'Vietnam's Development Strategy' (2006), Pietro Masina explains how Vietnam's strategies differed from those of other East Asian states. Masina underscores the 'East Asian Miracle' in discussing the impressive economic growth of several East Asian states, and considers that much of Vietnam's economic success is due to its being a country that is very much still in transition, when compared to other East Asian states, such as South Korea and Japan, with their extraordinary economic development. Vietnam's growth in GDP per capita was 2.9% in 1970, 3.5% in 1980, and around 5% in the 1990s (Glewwe, 2004: 33). Against this backdrop, Vietnam can be said to have emulated the successes of its economically advanced neighbours such as China. Masina argues that developing states such as Vietnam tend to seek inspiration from more economically advanced neighbouring states. In this case, it can be argued that advanced neighbour states played a role in the adoption of Doi Moi. This includes the motivation for the success of neighbouring countries that had aided in learning and navigating economically.

The success of neighbouring countries created a sense of rivalry, which in most cases fueled progress and aided the state in ensuring that it did not make the same mistakes they had. made. "Vietnamese economic reform also incorporates another dimension, specifically, a transition from a centrally planned economy to a 'socialist market economy', which makes this country different from most of its neighbours with the notable exception of China" (Masina, 2006: 38). The literature further argues that despite the similarities in the region, in terms of its economy, Vietnam cannot be compared with most neighbouring countries regarding

its transition. This is because the transition was from a centrally planned economy to a regulated market economy. The economy of China compares with Vietnam, as both states are driven by Communist ideology yet function as socialist market economies.

The literature also presents the notion of the East Asian Development State, which engages in most of the same complicated growth tactics as the experiments in East Asia, particularly Japan, Taiwan and South Korea. As mentioned, it is argued that developing states such as Vietnam seek inspiration from more economically advanced neighbouring states that have arguably aided the adoption of Doi Moi. Masina includes Vietnam in the development state model, suggesting that it seeks to strengthen its national market institutions without demolishing state control as part of an overall path of societal transformation (Masina, 2006: 27-28). Doi Moi promotes global integration for increased economic benefits, thus ensuring that Hanoi is more attractive for foreign investors, widening the opportunity for foreign direct investment and potentially aiding economic growth. The literature suggests that the justification for this could be to benefit from the comparative advantage of a cheap and highly skilled labour force. Henceforth, it can be argued that the implementation of capitalism in Vietnam can be due to several causes, one of them being the requirement for renovated planning and government intervention. From a comparative perspective, Vietnam's application of capitalism without the hindrance of its current one-party state is an achievement.

Elliott (2012), in *In Changing Worlds: Vietnam's Transition from Cold War to Globalization*, describes the ideological shift in Vietnam from a Marxist-Leninist state to a deep engagement in globalization, and attributes its need for global integration to the imperatives of succeeding in an economic transition. Elliot suggests that Vietnam seeks to revive Communism despite the removal from official discourse of Marxist-Leninist values. "When Vietnam had the chance to diversify its options in the mid-1990s by joining ASEAN and establishing diplomatic relations with the US, it did so" (p. 88). Joining ASEAN was seen as a big step in its leap to global integration, as there was lingering nationalist concern. This helped Vietnam boost its intergovernmental cooperation with a network of alliances and further political and economic growth. Not only was membership in ASEAN important in the nation's economic transition, but it sought to associate itself with economic giants such as the US and China. The normalizing of trade and diplomatic relations with the United States opened opportunities to work

with highly developed economies and international organizations, including contributors such as the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank. This can be said to be due to its aim of diversifying the nation's political and strategic options in an increasingly unipolar world.

What accounts for Vietnam's transition? This question is highlighted by Glewwe et al. (2004). They recognize Vietnam's performance economically and socially in the 1990s as one of the most successful among countries in that period. The authors discuss the economic transition, with the use of quantitative data, in terms of macro-economic growth, household enterprises, and agricultural policies. An example "...the poverty rate declined from about 75% of the population in 1984 to 58% in 1993 and 37% in 1998. The sharp drop in only five years from 1993 to 1998 is an achievement that is rarely seen in any developing country, and the economic growth since 1998 suggests that the poverty rate has continued to decline into the 21st century" (p. 25). The rapid economic growth was accompanied by sharp decreases in poverty. This also meant that Vietnam was not greatly affected by the East Asian financial crisis. Despite the economic stagnation, it lasted only briefly and had no significant effect. On the other hand, it highlights the importance of policy changes in the agricultural sector. "In 1987 and 1988, price controls were gradually removed for agricultural goods, and farm households were allowed to sell any surplus products at whatever the price market could bear" (p. 20). Policy changes meant that large restrictions on exports could be lifted, whereas natural resources could be put to use. The majority of the outstanding restrictions on export were removed in the 1990s. A result of this was that it aided Vietnam to become the world's largest exporter of rice by 1992, and from the late 1990s, the second largest exporter of coffee beans, following Brazil.

In "Learning to be Capitalists," Annette Kim (2009) takes a different approach to interpreting Vietnam's economic transition and how it contrasts to the developmental states of the East Asian miracle economies such as China. She describes the interests that helped form new economic relations largely within the real estate market. The literature views Vietnam's economic transition from an institutional perspective by suggesting that solving the puzzle of the transition requires reconsidering the role of cognition in institutional change. Kim argues that the wide governmental interference in institutions resulted in a stagnant transition. The relaxation of state action can release flows of revenue, which both benefits many people and can serve the state interest. By relaxing governmental regulations,



it can provide adequate incentives for people and firms, especially foreign firms, to make investments and be entrepreneurial, encouraging market capitalism (pp. 5-6). Kim suggests that the drive for functional reform resulted from the observation that a single reform path was flawed. The idea of path dependency is said to affect desired outcomes (p. 8).

The decentralization of land use authority played a major role in increasing entrepreneurship in some cities, including Ho Chi Minh City. Affected were not only entrepreneurs but also firms, private investors, and households, while economic planning was decentralized to local governments (Kim, 2009: 95). This contrasts with previous literature as it highlights the concept of 'fiscal socialism'. This emphasizes the character of the state in land development as it raises awareness of the vital role it plays. Thus, it can be argued that the role of Vietnam's authoritarian government has had a limiting impact on the ability to promote development and guide the economy through a transition.

### **Containing Covid-19**

"Fighting the epidemic is like fighting the enemy" (Thoi, 2020: 1). Having identified the factors that account for Vietnam's success in its economic transition over the years, in this section I will look at what accounts for its success in battling Covid since its first case on January 23, 2020. In 'Ho Chi Minh City: The front line against Covid-19 in Vietnam' (2020), Pham Thoi argues that the urgency of tackling the virus stemmed from consideration of the situation presented by Vietnam's sharing a long border with China, where the virus began. In this case, it was only logical for the state to tighten not only its borders but also its policies. The question remains, how have these restrictions been implemented? And would they affect Vietnam's economic transition? Their execution would require not only great leadership but also a responsive population. The literature further suggests that, with Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc as the figurehead for the battle against Covid, the whole political system joined the fight. Vietnam's battle involved representations of unity and nationalism. Arguably, its past historic reunification and current nationalism may have been projected onto the battle with Covid, facilitating its success. By February 1, the number of cases had risen to six; the government of Vietnam then declared the outbreak an epidemic (Huynh, 2020).

Prime minister Phuc, with the aid of the media, announced the epidemic as a public emergency, embracing fear and encouraging fast action. The day-by-day update of Covid information made sure that the population was aware, and no one left unadvised. The media communicated side-by-side with officials such as the Ministry of Health (MOH) about how the public should proceed (Ha et al., 2020: 3). The decentralization of government in the country fueled the claim of shared responsibility. Hence, the improved capacity of local governments added to the quality of public health services delivered not only in centralised areas such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City but in highland regions too. This is an indication that it remained easier for Vietnam to deploy its track and tracing system across municipalities. The urgency of this meant to the government that the spread of infections could be reduced as lockdown measures were instituted in provinces where the number of cases was high. Overall, the evident co-operation between provinces ensured the aid of most citizens in responding to any sign of disparity between regions – reducing further the risk of the spread of infection (Huynh et al., 2020: 237-39).

In terms of cooperation, it can be argued that, since the reunification of North and South Vietnam in 1975, the region has been more integrated than ever, as was proven throughout the pandemic. This is arguably because at the heart of the success of the Vietnamese government in fighting against the Covid-19 pandemic was the ability of provincial governments to function efficiently. During the pandemic, efforts to strengthen the intergovernmental system and subnational governments have been put to the test. The cooperation of subnational governments remained at the forefront for managing covid. Subnational authorities remained responsible for instituting strict lockdowns, and the temporary closure of non-essential businesses and public services, as well as enforcing social distancing in areas that are experiencing outbreaks. For example, to prevent the further spread of outbreaks, “61 out of 63 provinces took early action and closed school and colleges/universities.” Accordingly, high-density provinces such as Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) and Hanoi have been proactive in battling Covid-19. Cities such as HCMC have managed infections by receiving patients from other areas in the south, as hotels and student dorms were promptly designated as institutional quarantine sites by provincial governments (Huynh et al., 2020: 238). The decentralisation of the government conferred shared responsibility on local officials for the prevention and management of cases, as governing bodies were able to institute lockdowns in areas experiencing outbreaks. With the combined

efforts of government at all levels, Vietnam has successfully demonstrated that a coordinated response by central and local governments remained crucial for the effectiveness of Covid-19 policies.

Nevertheless, the state-imposed lockdown would have been easier under a more authoritarian regime. New Covid regulations promulgated by the national government included closing non-essential businesses and enforcing social distancing policies. At the same time, provincial governments remained at the frontline in delivering social and economic relief. Hence, they have played a significant role in reviewing and modifying (and, in some cases, briefly suspending) the delivery of public services to limit the virus's dissemination (Huynh et al., 2020). Effective measures also included the limiting of crowds of people, the suspension of flights from China and other countries where infection levels were high, and requiring members of the public to wear masks in public spaces. Regardless of the measures taken, new health regulations were implemented. The government implemented a 2000-bed field hospital, while testing capacities were increased as a response. Nevertheless, although many new regulations have been put in place, the combined efforts of provincial governments and the Vietnamese population have contributed to the success and efficiency of efforts to control the virus. COVID

Despite the preliminary success in decelerating the spread of cases and minimising potential fatalities, the country has also witnessed several unprecedented challenges. As the pandemic started, medical resources for prevention systems only allocated 20% of the total national health budget (Van Nguyen et al., 2020: 991). Arguably, it is due to this that the country experienced a shortage of medical supplies. This included medical and protective equipment such as ventilators, masks, and gowns. Consequently, with limited resources, the pandemic posed a significant threat and a great challenge to the country. Accordingly, by March 20, 2020, the decisive act of mandating isolation for 14 days for individuals returning from abroad came into effect (Ha et al., 2020: 3). However, the prolonged use of this tactic could leave a large window that would allow travellers to enter the country and likely import cases. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that, despite unprecedented setbacks, Vietnam remained capable of flattening the curve and protecting its citizens.

## Conclusion

To conclude, in a comparative review of the literature, Vietnam's success over decades - largely beginning in the 1980's - has been demonstrated. It aimed to distinguish the efforts of economic transition in Vietnam that have been made apparent by accentuating the struggle that was witnessed pre-Doi Moi. The reforms of Doi Moi have been shown to count heavily in the transition, although they included policies that were outside socialism proper. While not all reforms were as easily accepted as others, this showed that socialist-oriented states can step into a market economy. I have considered a variety of factors in trying to account for Vietnam's success in comparison with other East Asian economies. However, to fully assess all achievements in economic development would be difficult in a short essay. With the help of comparisons in the literature, it becomes obvious that many factors have played a major role in the transition, from the adoption of new reforms enforcing global integration to the decentralization of governments to allow the privatisation of businesses. The similarities found in the literature highlight the fact that Vietnam is a country that remains in a continual transition.

Vietnam's fight against the virus has also been a success story. The nation utilised strategic methods that differed widely from those used in other ASEAN states. The remarkable unity among the population along with the aid of officials made successful the closure of schools, transportation facilities, and borders to stop further spread. Vietnam's nationalism emphasised the importance of human life. We have seen that the prompt, strategic, and decisive response of the state, the extensive efforts of health education, and the coordination of provincial governments have all played salient roles in flattening the curve of infections and deaths in Vietnam. The present authoritarian regime arguably made it easier to engage effective strategy actions on behalf of its citizens. Overall, the prevalent nationalism and strong government response underscored the importance to both the government and the people of human life. In a country where economic gain was the main goal, the health of its people is what has mattered most.

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PART **IV**

**ENERGY AND DEVELOPMENT IN  
THE ERA OF COVID-19**



# 12

## SAUDI ARABIA: STATE, ENERGY, DEVELOPMENT, AND THE MANAGEMENT OF COVID-19

*Nicoleta-Andreea Petrovici*

### **Abstract**

Energy and the state have played an essential role in the Saudi Arabian political economy since the 1970s. Oil has provided the state with a huge income to manage its development. The state has invested heavily in infrastructure, attracted foreign investment, and built a robust economy. However, the outbreak of the Covid-19 has changed the scenario. The state has had to balance the needs to both manage oil exports and contain the pandemic. This article assesses the degree to which the Saudi state has managed Covid-19 without harming its development.

### **Introduction**

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is the second leading oil producing country in the world (Worldometer, 2021). It also owns one of the biggest public petroleum and natural gas companies, Saudi Aramco. The oil wealth that the KSA has amassed has been proven to create dependency, but the kingdom is now looking to broaden its prospects and focus on other forms of development to maximize its use of its central place on the world stage post-hydrocarbon dependency.

It should be noted that the possibility of oil hindering development is usually considered to be a consequence of a nation's having an authoritarian regime, which creates a high degree of reliance on the political system (Friedman, 2009). These regimes also tend to occur in newly developed economies, enabling them to become prone to dependency. A case study of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia will be used to tackle this question and explore the contested concept of development. Due to voting being limited to municipal elections in KSA, the national leaders can impose stricter rules on citizens without the risks of being voted out of office. Saudi has held three local elections in the past sixteen years – in 2005,



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2011, and 2015 (National Democratic Institute). What do people think about this? More importantly, do most Saudis want democracy? In August and September of 2018, Zogby Research Services surveyed 8,628 adults across multiple Arab nations including Saudi Arabia (Lebaron, 2019). Respondents were asked, ‘Of the following list of issues facing your country, which are the three most important issues that need to be addressed? Rank them from 1 (being the most important issue) through 3’. In KSA, responders voted employment as number one, and political reform and personal rights as four and six, respectively. Democracy came third to last at number eight, an issue that in all of the other countries surveyed was under five on the scale of importance (Zogby Research Services, 2018).

It has been made abundantly clear that for most Saudis democracy is not a pressing issue, while personal rights and freedoms are. Would it be possible to maintain a system in which democracy is not present, but political rights and personal freedoms are at the core of society?

Table 1. Of the following list of issues facing your country, which are the three most important issues that need to be addressed? Rank them from 1 (being the most important issue) through 3.	
KSA	
Employment (1)	
Education (8)	
Extremist groups (7)	
Political reform (5)	
End corruption (2)	
Personal rights (4)	
Foreign enemies*	
Democracy (3)	
Health care (6)	
Women's rights (9)	
For countries where we asked this same question in 2011 (all except Palestine and Turkey), the rank order of the issue in 2011 is included in parentheses. *“Protecting the country from foreign enemies” is a new choice in the 2018 survey.	

In tackling these questions, the COVID-19 pandemic has offered a different outlook. As Saudi Arabia appears to be emerging successfully from the pandemic, development in the country is flourishing. Below I will look closely at the ways in which KSA dealt with the pandemic and how they have brought increased development in ways that point to the possibility of a more sustainable kind that is no longer based on oil wealth.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Robert Gilpin defines international political economy as “the reciprocal and dynamic interaction in international relations of the pursuit of wealth and the pursuit of power” (Keohane, 1984, p. 18).” The most notable factor affecting power and wealth in the contemporary world is energy, especially in the Middle East, where development has been rather fruitful infra-structurally. Energy and development are known to have a directly proportional relationship, such that when one grows, so does the other. The effect that these two factors have on a country depends greatly on the economic sphere and the prevailing political dogmas. A thought-provoking paradox emerges, as it becomes apparent that oil wealth can bring a nation more harm than good. Rolf Schwarz draws on the paradox of the resource curse and looks at growth failures attributed to resource-wealthy countries. In this scenario, natural resources help raise living standards while failing to produce self-sustaining growth (Schwarz, 2008), creating strong ties between natural resource wealth and the likelihood of weak democratic development, and, with the emergence of authoritarianism, corruption and civil war (Schwarz, 2008). Thus, a balance is needed to manage both the country’s wealth and the livelihood of people so that they can also benefit. Unemployment, unbiased education, inequality, freedom of speech, and fair elections should be put at the forefront of concerns.

The COVID-19 pandemic has aided in attempting to answer this question, as citizens in the KSA are more likely to rely on the government, making it easier to manage a pandemic. This has involved what may be considered a new form of modernization, as it has allowed for development within the health care sector in a way opposite to the Western model, as citizens have had to adhere to the rules. The Saudi response to the pandemic provides some insight into how limiting political freedoms could be of benefit in a crisis situation.

## Energy and Development

Farzana Naz defines development as a process that involves growth, maturation, or advancement in a country; she criticizes the idea as not being a case of ‘one size fits all’ but as instead subject to unevenness. “The questions to ask about a country’s development are three: What has been happening to poverty? What has been happening to unemployment? What has been happening to inequality? If all three of these have declined from high levels, then beyond doubt this has been a period of development for the country concerned” (Naz, 2006). Looking at the answers to these three questions in the context of the KSA, poverty and unemployment are not an issue; however, the rampant inequality outweighs the positives. It is important to see all sides of development, not just the economic one, but its political side as well. The Freedom House Index, which looks at political rights and civil liberties, gave Saudi Arabia a score of 10/100 in 2017; this dropped to 7/100 in 2018, and has remained at that level to this date (Freedom House).

To provide a context for the oil boom, it is crucial to look at how Saudi Arabia developed, and also at OPEC, which was established in 1960 with Saudi Arabia as one of the founding members. In 1973, when the oil crisis occurred, the price of oil rose sharply; it went from \$4.75 per barrel to \$12.21 in 1975 (Inflation Data, 2021). This caused the Saudi economy to grow, with its GDP increasing from \$14.95B in 1973 to \$184B in 1981 (World Bank, 2021). The oil and gas sector accounts for about 50% of GDP, and about 70% of export earnings in Saudi Arabia (OPEC, 2021). Most of the oil reserves and production are managed by Saudi Aramco, which is a state-owned corporation, allowing the earnings to remain in the royal family’s possession. From an economic standpoint, oil and gas are different from other sources of income in being assets. That do not need to be produced but are merely extracted. This creates a quicker profit stream.

Oil development today is different than in the early twentieth century, as oil-producing countries are now dependent on revenues based on the export of petroleum. This dependence is measured by the ratio of oil and gas exports to GDP. A dependent country may need oil exports to make up 60-95% of its total exports. In this sense, Saudi Arabia is indeed a country that runs on an oil-dependent economy. Those oil-producing countries that cannot manage to find the right balance tend to focus on resources, which then creates a non-competitive market in other areas, proving true the notion of resource curse. Resource booms make non-resource sectors less competitive, leading to a decline in economic growth,

because the country's main focus is around resources (Van Der Ploeg, 2011). This phenomenon has been coined the Dutch Disease; it hinders the country's development in a way that inevitably leads to an economic impasse. When trying to quantify the success of oil with regard to development, one of the key factors to remember is that oil in itself does not encourage or hinder growth. The resource curse occurs due to a combination of factors: price deflation and price volatility of international commodities hinder economic development, oil price volatility negatively influences budgets, and the unpredictability of prices has a negative impact on investments and wealth distribution. The oil industry in itself is not a broad one in terms of employment. It requires few jobs, and most do not require a broad set of skills, thus when an economy is centred around it, the importance of education does not seem so apparent, though in Saudi Arabia the literacy rate in KSA high, at 95.3% (Macro Trends, 2017). To put things into perspective, the presence of oil alone does not hinder economic development, but the implications of having oil as a primary resource are not helpful, especially when poor management is in place.

A two-sided argument flourishes here, as some believe that money from energy is beneficial and can be seen as an opportunity, since it has aided in the development of infrastructure, tourist attractions, education networks, and other things. Others see the Dutch Disease as a curse coming at the cost of authoritarian rule and obedience to the governing body. In the KSA's case, the presence of the monarchy makes the country politically underdeveloped, with a lack of democratic agency. The sense of development remaining 'backwards' may be a Western point of view. Political development in the context of Western politics is not a 'one size fits all' matter, especially when it comes to 'theocracies'. Political development is often measured through governmental transparency and political freedom. It is widely considered that Saudi Arabia has failed in both of those respects. Oil revenue reached levels so high that citizens are not taxed on individual income, reducing the need for the government to receive their approval to maintain the state, and breaking any link between taxation and representation. The impact authoritarianism has had on democracy and development is highlighted by the unequal distribution of the energy-based revenue wherein only the elites seem to prosper.

'The First Law of Petropolitics', an idea coined by the economist Thomas L. Friedman, looks at how authoritarianism develops as a result of oil wealth, leading to the conclusion that oil hinders political development while perpetuating

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economic growth, though as mentioned above, it can reach stagnation. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, this prediction has proven to be even more accurate, as strict laws have been put in place to reduce the spread of the disease, and digital health has been aided by wealth amassed from oil. The First Law of Petropolitics states that the price of oil and the price of freedom always move in separate directions in oil-rich states (see Appendix A). This is explained as happening because “the higher the price of oil goes, the less petrolist leaders are sensitive to what the world thinks or says about them. Thus, if the price of oil is lower, leaders are forced to move towards a political system that is more transparent and focused on attracting investments abroad” (Friedman, 2009).” Petrolist states tend to have authoritarian regimes and a dependency on oil production for exports and GDP. Countries with an abundance of crude oil that had well-established economies tend to avoid falling under Friedman’s First Law, but this has not been the case for the KSA. Friedman identifies four mechanisms that lead to excessive oil wealth hindering democracy: the taxation effect, the spending effect, the repression effect, and the modernization effect. “No representation without taxation” becomes a slogan of great importance regarding political development. As Saudi Arabia does not have a tax on individual income, the monarchs do not rely on constituents in order to survive. They simply drill oil and do not have to listen to their citizens’. The spending effect looks at oil wealth leading to patronage spending, which weakens the demand for democratization. The repression effect takes into account the amounts of cash states have used to equip police and intelligence forces, which can be used to prevent independent political groups from forming, especially if they demand political rights, suppressing political freedom and consequently development. Lastly, the modernization effect considers the massive influx of oil wealth and underlines its potential to diminish social pressures for urbanization and high levels of education - both things that would broaden economic development (Friedman, 2009).

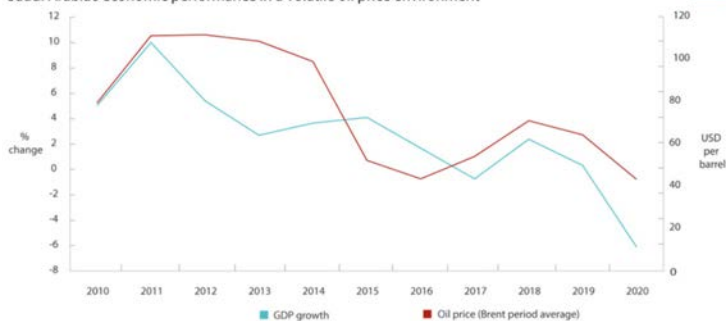
Diplomatic and foreign affairs may suffer as well. In 2005, the Wall Street Journal published an article about how Iran had turned its back on a deal involving the Turkish government and Turkcell, a Turkish mobile phone operator, worth \$300M with a \$2.25B investment from the Turkish government (see Appendix B). The KSA’s rulers reasoned that with its oil wealth, such deals are unnecessary, suggesting a willingness to undermine international relations due to overestimating, perhaps in vanity, their ability to rely on oil wealth. KSA also made an arms deal with the United States in 2017 that led to its perpetuating violence

in the region through KSA's involvement in the Yemeni Civil War. 'Elected' autocrats used oil wealth to put themselves in power, buy up opponents and supporters, and extend their stronghold on the private sector. Some of the worst regimes - in terms of freedom and the way they treat political opponents - will have cash for a longer time than imagined (Friedman, 2009); a prime example of this being Saudi Arabia.

### COVID-19 and Development in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

In April 2020, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the price of Brent crude fell to under 20 USD per barrel (Country Economy, 2021). The volatile price of oil snowballed, leading to a decline in Saudi Aramco's net profits, reported as a 44.6% drop in the third quarter of 2020. Aramco agreed to slash capital expenditures (Sayegh, 2020) and reduce oil production by one million barrels a day, due to low demand in the first quarter of 2021 (Reed, 2021). Even with prices slowly recovering – they stood at 60 USD per barrel in February 2021 (Country Economy, ) – it is scarcely possible that the goal of 80 USD per barrel needed to balance the budget deficit will be reached. Oxford Economics predicts that Brent crude prices will not exceed 55 USD per barrel annual average before 2023 (Tricaud, 2020). However, this might occur earlier due to the increase in prices per barrel that has been occurring in the first two months of 2021. Saudi's economy being hydrocarbon-dependent means it is also reliant on the price of Brent crude to rise, as per the graph below.

Saudi Arabia's economic performance in a volatile oil price environment



Source: Central Department of Statistics/Haver Analytics, Energy Information Administration/Haver Analytics

(From: Tricaud, 2020).

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However, with the hope of ‘Saudi Vision 2030’, there may be room for a diversification of GDP growth.

Despite the economic downturn becoming prominent, as the total public debt has reached 32.7% of GDP in 2021 (KPMG, 2020), compared to 6.4% of GDP in 2020 (KPMG, 2019), diversification projects remain of the utmost importance, even with the pandemic in full swing. Evidencing the hypothesis of oil wealth-led development benefiting infrastructure is the growth in KSA’s government spending towards Neom. “On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August, Minister of Energy Abd al-Aziz bin Salman Al Saud and Nadhmi al-Nasr – the CEO of NEOM, a megacity being built by a government-owned company – signed a cooperation agreement to develop the project’s energy infrastructure” (Tricaud, 2020). Neom is a planned city in Tabuk Province, the northwest region of the Kingdom, with hopes of the first phase being finalized by 2025 (Index Saudi). The project is a subset of the Saudi Vision 2030 initiative, which is aimed at diversifying Saudi’s hydrocarbon-driven economy while developing it into other sectors. The vision focuses on investing locally and increasing employment. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, oil revenue was decreasing while non-oil revenue was seeing an increase from 2018 to 2019 (as shown in the graph below), highlighting the efficiency of diversification and the road to hydrocarbon-free development.

Figure 1: Real GDP growth breakdown (% change year-on-year)

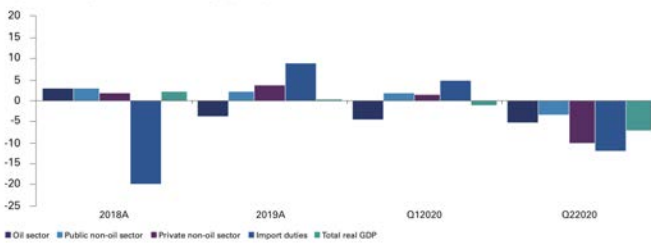
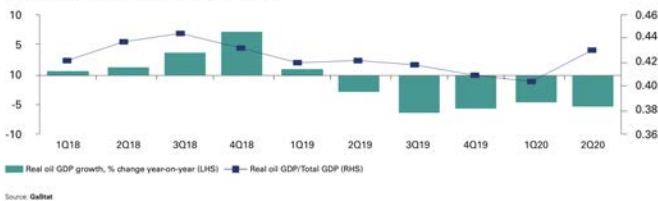


Figure 2: Real oil GDP growth and oil sector contribution to GDP



(KPMG, 2020)

## **Pandemic Eradication Tactics in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

Some of the wealth amassed through oil has been used to launch an efficient set of phone applications to provide health care services to the residents of Saudi Arabia during the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital health has been put at the forefront when handling the pandemic, and the Saudi Ministry of Health has relied on four apps that offer artificial intelligence components to tackle the spread of the virus: Tetamman (Rest Assured, 2021), Tabaud (Social Distancing, 2021), and Tawakkalna, in addition to a new version of the Sehhaty app (Obaid, 2020).

Tetamman is a platform through which users can book appointments for COVID-19 tests. The communication services embedded in the app provide follow-ups on each user, encouraging individuals to report any symptoms experienced in the days following. Tabaud tracks the spread of COVID-19 infections, alerting users if they have been in contact with someone who has tested positive in the past 14 days (Obaid, 2020). The Tawakkalna app was developed to issue movement permits electronically during the curfew period. Users can also use Tawakkalna to report any violations of the policies imposed to eliminate the spread of the virus (SDAIA, 2020). Lastly, Sehhaty is used to provide medical consultations and appointments at public health centres offered in the desired area (Obaid, 2020). These apps have been a roaring success, with 7M users on Tawakkalna, 2.7M COVID-19 tests being administered at Takkad drive-through clinics, and 1.9M people visiting the Tetamman clinics. Saudi Arabia has thus been said to have been handling the pandemic quite well, with the aid of technological investments (Obaid, 2020).

The unstructured character of the economy has aided the pandemic, as it allowed for assets to be easily used in order to inhibit the spread of COVID-19. KSA has dealt with the pandemic quite well with the help of digital health applications, and its vaccine rollout has also been efficient. With surveillance being easier to implement on citizens due to the regime's having no individual income taxation, people are bound to do what the monarchy dictates. As there is much economic leeway regarding private assets, citizens are mostly obedient, as the graph above has also shown, with personal freedoms classified as sixth on the scale of issues most important to those surveyed. Thus, in a paradoxical way, the pandemic has aided Saudi Arabia, not only in shifting hydrocarbon dependency and using income to build new infrastructure, but also in handling the pandemic through digital means and efficient media suppression in order to minimize vaccine hesitancy.



As the media is tightly-controlled, so is the official messaging on vaccines (Schaer, 2021). This can be seen as both positive and negative.

The virus reached its peak in June 2020, when the number of cases per one million people was 126.90. By February 2021, that number has dropped significantly, to only 9.36 (Roser, 2021) (see Appendix C). With concrete assets derived from oil and a subsequent platform of focusing on diversifying the economy and efficient growth as well as on technological development, a simplistic approach seems to have paid off and aided in handling the pandemic.

It is interesting to hypothesize that the fall of Brent crude back in April might have given a helping hand with Saudi Arabia's newer economic spheres. Had it not been for the pandemic and the all-time low oil demand, KSA's focus on Neom and other mega-projects might have been eclipsed by its price-war in oil with Russia, which began on March 8, 2020.

## **Conclusion**

This article has looked at Saudi Arabia's past within the context of the oil boom and OPEC, through an analysis of the emergence of petro-authoritarianism, lack of individual freedoms, and the hydrocarbon dependency that formed as a result of an unconstructed economy. It then moved to analyse the present situation and the success of the diversification that came as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. An argument has also been made for the formation of a non-Western-centred development model, a post-oil wealth development form centring around a more sustainable economy, which could be implemented with limited individual freedoms, as economic incentives seem to be a greater desire for the Saudi people. The COVID-19 pandemic has proven the argument correct through the creation of digital health systems and media suppression to ensure the efficiency of the vaccine rollout. It is natural to want to look into the future and hypothesize about what diversification might bring for development and for the projects the country envisions; however, such assumptions would only be loosely based on the vision they want to convey. The current situation in the Saudi kingdom is certainly in flux.

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# 13

## ENERGY, STATE, AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE GULF COUNTRIES: CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19

*Giorgia Monsignori*

### **Abstract**

The discovery of oil in the Middle East led to expansive development and introduced new challenges for many countries in the region. The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, both energy-rich, have experienced a range of benefits and limitations in terms of economic growth, development, and their political implications. This article seeks to assess the scope of influence in resource-rich Gulf countries and their development, using the framework of rentier state theory and the role in it of wealth distribution to explain why authoritarian governance has seemed inherent to this region. The purpose of this article is to objectively analyse the relationship between energy, state, and development in relation to the question why the region remains authoritarian. Since the inception of the Covid-19 pandemic, most of the world's states have taken measures to further public health safety and also sustain their nation's economy. Research has shown that the UAE has been efficient in implementing strict measures to curb the consequences of Covid-19. I will conclude that although rentier states have their limitations, it can be seen that the authoritarian character of the UAE and Saudi Arabia has enabled these nations to be better prepared to pursue economic diversification and respond constructively to the unprecedented global pandemic.

### **Introduction**

Energy has played a significant role in the trajectory of development of the oil-producing Gulf countries (GC). Before the 1950s, the region remained largely underdeveloped, with predominantly agricultural economies. Since then, they have developed at a rapid rate and reached similar levels to the most developed countries

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in the world. When the Covid-19 outbreak occurred in 2020, the region, like the rest of the world, had to face the impacts of the pandemic. Two countries in particular, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), had to restructure their economic plans as a result. This article investigates how Saudi Arabia and the UAE emerged as dominant economic powers in the region through their energy-related industries. It attempts to analyse their growth in terms of energy and the role of the state throughout several developmental stages. I begin with a short introduction to the history of the discovery and exploitation of oil in the region. This is crucial in providing a historical background for explaining the importance of energy in the process of development in resource-rich states. I will then analyse the role of the state in energy and development. Since the resources and wealth in the UAE and Saudi Arabia are largely controlled by the governments and rulers, the authoritarian character of these societies has had significant impacts on development. Finally, I will examine the impacts of Covid-19 and the response of the state. The pandemic has shown that it can hinder economic programmes and development.

### **Early History**

In the early twentieth century, the countries in the Middle East were considered to have among the lowest levels of development in the world, both politically and economically. Saudi Arabia was underdeveloped and its economy quite limited; most of its revenues derived from pilgrimages, taxes, and agriculture (Almtairi, 1985). Yearly reports indicate government revenues amounting to 500,000 USD (*ibid.*). Similarly, in the early 1930s, the United Arab Emirates was considered a country of fishing villages, and was mostly occupied by Bedouins and various tribes (Morton, 2011). The country had experienced poverty due to its failure in the pearl trade; further economic ventures included date plantations and other agricultural activities (Morton, 2011). Neighbouring countries in the region largely participated in similar economic activities. For example, Bahrain also based its economy on fishing, pearl diving, and palm tree cultivation. As states in the Middle East were deprived economically, this was reflected in the larger society. The population in Saudi Arabia was substantially poor and illiterate; furthermore, disease was widespread (Almtairi, 1985). The rest of the region faced a similar situation. Oman, for example, had insufficient healthcare, educational institutions, and a general lack of infrastructure (Medhat, 2018). In 1908, Iran was the first country to discover large oil reserves in the region (Kent, 2015). From this point

on, a new wave of exploration and extraction of natural resources ensued throughout the Middle East. Saudi Arabia's oil discoveries took place in 1938, and its commercial development resulting in drilling for oil to be exported. Oil quickly rose to providing 95% of the national income and would be used to fund various economic development programs in the country. The income from oil transformed what had once been a traditional small economy into a modern industrial society (Almtairi, 1985). The United Arab Emirates discovered its oil fields around 1960, and these were quickly developed and made ready for exportation by 1962 (Morton, 2011). Countries in the region quickly began to participate in oil production, to reap the benefits of this natural resource. By 1972, Saudi Arabia reported that its oil revenues had expanded by 45%, and production levels increased to 2,201.8 million barrels a day (Almtairi, 1985). The natural resource gained the nickname 'black gold', not only for the black colour of oil but also for the large wealth everyone involved acquired. The discovery and extraction of oil would change the path of many of these states and bring to them major investments and development (Usborne, 2020).

### Rentier States

Oil had a major impact on the structure and governance of these countries, as well as on how natural resources were allocated. Rentier state theory aims to illustrate the relationship between the sale of oil on international markets and political systems and governance within the country. A rentier state is defined as a state in which the main government revenue is gained from rent, in oil or resources, paid by foreign actors. In consequence, the political and economic systems are heavily reliant on external revenue. Also, the wealth and control of natural resources remain among a small elite (Karl, 2007). The wealth is then distributed among the population, while the state largely stays financially autonomous from its citizens. In fact, rentier states rely on the process of allocation and redistribution. Rentier state theory explains the dynamic and different form of governance that is involved in a large number of countries in the Middle East (Malachova, 2012). As will be seen, rentier state theory suggests that oil and the control of natural resources are what keep the region's governments remaining largely authoritarian.

A key feature of rentier states is public investment and approval (Malachova, 2012). The discoveries of oil allowed leaders to use their new-found wealth to invest in infrastructure and the development of their own citizens. This section will argue



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that oil aided the development of countries in the Middle East, and can be seen as more of a blessing than a curse. Since the mid-twentieth century, most countries in the region (Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) have experienced substantial growth of GDP from oil revenues (Karl, 2007). In the 1950s, Saudi Arabia's yearly revenue was around 500,000 USD (Almtairi, 1985); its GDP is now 793 billion USD (Data Commons, 2021). The new income from oil has funded many aspects of the country's economic development. The sudden increase of wealth has been used to develop transportation, communication, education, healthcare, and overall infrastructure (Malchova, 2012). In this sense, oil has been a blessing, as it has given citizens of the country a more settled and diverse life. The benefits for energy-rich countries have included economic growth, the creation of new jobs, new career opportunities, and transfers of technology. The leaders of Saudi Arabia, with help from the Central Planning Organization, created 5-year programmes for the country's economic development. The main goal of these plans was to raise the nation's standard of living (Almtairi, 1985). The increased revenues from oil directly gave the country the opportunity to use its wealth to further develop the economy and well-being of its population.

The case of the United Arab Emirates is another example of development benefits derived from oil wealth. The country's current GDP is 421.1 billion USD, exceeding that of Singapore (Data Commons, 2021). The UAE's economy is the second largest in the Middle East (Morton, 2011). In 1971, the country ranked 62nd on the Human Development Index; by 2010 it had reached 30th place (Crown Prince Court, 2010). The rulers of the UAE invested in their citizens and the infrastructure of the country through various approaches. The wealth from oil revenues was redistributed and used for health, free education, public services, social security, and other goods accessible to citizens (Morton, 2011). Forty years ago, the literacy rate was 48%; since then, it has almost doubled to 93%. Furthermore, the average number of years of schooling has increased from 3 to 9 years. The UAE has also rebuilt itself through new technology and access to various tools; Dubai is one of the world's biggest tourist hubs and Abu Dhabi has been ranked as the safest city in the world (Crown Prince Court, 2010). Overall, without the wealth of oil rents and revenues, many countries in the Middle East would not have been able to fund these investments and developments. The rapid increase in development can be strongly linked to the oil discoveries, and can be said to have helped the growth of the countries both economically and politically.

Economists sometimes argue that the abundance of oil resources is a curse. Mainstream arguments in political discourse suggest that oil-led development is detrimental to both the economy and political circumstances of those who are energy-rich. The issue is that countries in the Middle East may be too dependent on oil, as it makes up a large percentage of national revenues (Karl, 2007). A common theory that explains the phenomenon is called the resource curse, which holds that there is an inverse relationship between overdependence on oil and growth (NRGI, 2015). Resource curse predicts low growth when a country experiences an abundance of a natural resource. In a study conducted for the members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), between 1965 and 1998 there was an average decrease in per capita GNP of 1.3% (Karl, 2007). Furthermore, the focus on petroleum extraction and exportation creates a barrier to economic diversification, as less attention is paid to other sectors of the economy (NRGI, 2015). This can also be explained by Dutch Disease. This phenomenon is said to apply when oil revenues are so high that they increase the real exchange rate of the country's currency; at this point it makes other possible exports non-competitive (Kolster, 2015). Oil as a commodity is also volatile; therefore, those who are dependent on, or heavily invested in, it are more frequently subjected to economic shocks and lack of financial discipline. An example of this was seen in 2014 when gas prices plummeted. Due to their dependence on oil and gas, many countries in the Middle East suffered. For instance, Kuwait struggled to adapt to the new reality, as its dependency on oil was exposed (Carvalho, 2017). A report by Tri International Consulting Group describes the damaging blow to Kuwait's fiscal balances, especially after a period of overspending. The country now has outlined a new vision for economic and fiscal reform programs aimed at better balancing Kuwait's economy by 2035 (Carvalho, 2017).

Another thing that may be considered a negative consequence of oil-led development is a weak society and the poor political structures it creates. The main source of revenue falls under the control of a small elite, and is then redistributed to the public. As many oil-rich countries collect little or no taxation from their citizens, they in turn are relieved from intense pressures of accountability (Kolster, 2015). Furthermore, by providing citizens with good infrastructure and access to healthcare, education, and other public services, the people remain content with the political structures in place. Many of the countries in the Middle East tend to be authoritarian, and power remains with certain families or leaders. They maintain power through security forces and public expenditure. Since

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revenue streams are directly controlled by the government, much information can be hidden by those in power, and corruption can be rampant. Furthermore, the future of the country is independently decided by the leaders of the country, and thus opposing ideas or parties may not be considered or even tolerated. The institutions and positions of power are ill-defined and commonly linked to patronage and nepotism (Karl, 2007). These can be considered detrimental consequences of a state being oil-rich, when this means that it pursues authoritarian forms of governance.

### **The Impact of Covid-19**

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, the governments in both UAE and Saudi Arabia have played a significant role in managing the pandemic. Both states have employed strict health measures to curb public gatherings, restrict travel, impose a quarantine, and establish testing procedures. Although the global rules enforced to prevent the spread of the disease were strict, measures in the UAE may be deemed authoritarian. For example, in the UAE, the regulations included issuing tracking electronic bracelets to ensure that those quarantining after travel remained at home. The governments of both countries maintained essential services, using communication tools such as radio, television, and social media apps to communicate frequently with the public (Poitevien, 2020). The states also initiated economic stimulus packages amounting to 97 billion USD, with the aim of protecting the private sector (Kabbani, 2020). The decline in oil prices, which have fallen as low as 20 USD per barrel, has negatively impacted states' incomes (Kabbani, 2020). Thus, energy dependency has harmed the economic development of oil-rich states, especially in uncertain times like a global pandemic. Both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have faced changes to their plans and programmes for economic diversification. In early March 2020, both countries entered full lockdown, which halted businesses, tourism, schools, and a large number of production and extraction sites and other sectors of the economy (Poitevien, 2020). Due to the global pandemic of Covid-19, the plans for strengthening their economies were halted. As of 2021, Saudi Arabia has had approximately 378,000 cases and 6,500 deaths; the United Arab Emirates had 399,000 cases and 1,269 deaths (CSSE, 2021). Thus, the unexpected consequences of Covid-19 were damaging to Gulf countries. However, they have been appropriately addressed by both countries through strict measures and precautions.

Alongside the oil revenue that both countries benefit from, there have been crucial drawbacks associated with it. Although the UAE and Saudi Arabia have made great strides to dismantle the dependence on oil, both countries' incomes still rely on the resource. When global pandemic forced oil prices to drop to 20 USD a barrel, this was a double blow to oil-rich countries that were still recovering from the fall of prices in 2014 (Rampone, 2020). The lower oil prices mean that the governments of both countries will have a budget deficit and will be forced to cut government spending or even impose increased taxes (Aslani, 2016). A further effect of this decrease is that initiatives for development will likely be negatively impacted. Saudi Arabia has tripled its value added tax (VAT) from 5% to 15% (Kawar, 2021). Increasing taxes this high may have further implications for the society. It is possible that although the citizens trust their government for protection and economic stability, with higher taxation the people may hold the government increasingly accountable for various problems (Moore, 2015). A key feature of authoritarian states in the region is that the wealth is put back into the society, and there is no income taxation. Increased taxation could change things. As the dynamic between state and society changes, the public might hold the government more accountable. Apart from increases in VAT, oil producers such as the Saudi Arabian Oil Company (ARAMCO) have had to make cuts too. The company has decreased its predicted annual spending from 34-40 billion to 25 billion USD. By 2030, Saudi Arabia's goal is to encourage non-oil revenue to SR1 trillion (Kawar, 2021). However, this goal may have to be rethought, as it seems unrealistic in the time of a pandemic.

The tourism industry is another sector that both countries are aggressively trying to develop. The United Arab Emirates reports that tourism now accounts for 11.5% of its GDP (Aburumman, 2020). The country recently started an initiative called MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Events), which has helped to diversify the country's economy. The main goal of MICE is to grow the tourism sector by making use of cultural and recreational resources (Aburumman, 2020). The pandemic closed the tourism industry for most of the world's countries; however, the UAE, as previously mentioned, was increasingly relying on tourism to diversify the country's trajectory. This sector of the economy accounted for not only the international visitors, but also the workforce employed within it. The estimated worldwide loss of jobs is 121 million (Kawar, 2020). Business tourism is said to be a key element in stimulating what has been predicted to be an intense development project (Aburumman, 2020). The new restrictions

## ENERGY, STATE, AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE GULF COUNTRIES: CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19

*Giorgia Monsignori*

would not only affect the number of people willing to fly to the UAE, but will also affect major companies such as Emirates Airlines, Etihad Airlines, and tourist destinations within the UAE. This halt in tourism holds threatening implications of economic crisis or recession for businesses and foreign investors in the near future for many countries in the region (Aburumman, 2020). Projects that both countries had invested in will have to be reduced or replanned. For example, Saudi Arabia will have to scale down its much-anticipated new construction of the city Neom. The plans for the predicted 550 billion USD city, which was to be the new touristic destination, have now been readjusted (Kawar, 2021).

The pandemic has also highlighted some of the benefits of an authoritarian form of governance. The new restrictions imposed on citizens in the UAE were taken extremely seriously in order to prevent further diseases. Although these may be seen as strict measures, the UAE has been highly successful in reducing the spread of the virus and reopening a large part of its tourism industry. The business analytics organization Deep Knowledge Group reported that the city of Abu Dhabi ranked best among the world's cities in handling the pandemic; in terms of economic response as well as health and safety procedures (Rahman, 2021). The authoritarian style of governance may be considered a strong factor in an effective response during a global pandemic. Due to its willingness to take certain measures to assure the overall safety of the general public, coupled with quick vaccination rollouts and hospital systems, the UAE's response has been considered highly successful (Rahman, 2021). Furthermore, trust in the government, due to the rentier state and authoritarian nature of governance, has been shown to be a major factor in handling the pandemic.

### Conclusion

To conclude, as shown by the evidence above, oil has presented both great advantages and barriers to development in the Middle East. The region experienced a large influx of wealth from the discovery of oil, and the revenues have been re-invested into their countries. There are noticeable economic problems that energy-rich countries face, such as Dutch Disease and resource curse. However, it can be argued that countries in the Middle East have become widely aware of the drawbacks of being overly dependent on oil, and have put in place reforms to counteract this. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have shown the benefits of using energy for development and economic growth. Furthermore, the awareness

of barriers to economic diversification has allowed for the creation of new economic programmes. Oil does have an impact on states and their futures, but it is also crucial how the state responds to issues impeding development. Both countries have shown themselves to be extremely resilient against the Covid-19 pandemic; by setting new economic goals and instituting measures to ensure public health. Although the global pandemic has set back development plans for both the United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, both countries have quickly responded to the new problems and readjusted their plans. Energy, development, and the state all play a role in the successes as well as the failures of the economy and government of Gulf countries. They have also impacted their Covid-19 responses.

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# 14

## POST-COVID DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES IN GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL STATES

*Kinkini Bhattacharya*

### **Abstract**

Since the discovery of oil in the Middle East, it has had a major impact especially on the Gulf countries in the region. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) have benefitted handsomely from the growing demand for energy in the world. Their dependency on energy has made them vulnerable to changing global supply, demand, prices, and recession. The Covid-19 has given the world economy a shock that the GCC could not escape, and so like every other country must manage it. This article examines the impact of the Covid pandemic and its implications for the GCC.

### **Introduction**

This article is an attempt to assess the impact of Covid-19 on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). I will first try to put into perspective the structural imbalances that plague the economies of the GCC. The unbalanced labour markets, the subsidies on energy, and above all the overdependence on oil and gas revenues have led to these economies being highly leveraged against global oil price fluctuations. I will discuss the impact of Covid and the significant amount of disruption that it has created for government budgets as well as on sectors like tourism – a key aspect of economic diversification – as well as on small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which have been greatly affected. As an example, in Bahrain SMEs contribute only about 28% of GDP, but 73% of private sector employment, while in Saudi Arabia the GDP contribution is 22% and the private sector employment contribution is about 50%.<sup>1</sup> The GCC nations, understanding

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.co.kearney.com/public-sector](http://www.co.kearney.com/public-sector)

the importance of this sector, have in turn announced a series of relief measures, including loan payment deferrals, reduction of interest rates, and increasing liquidity in the markets by unlocking financial packages.<sup>2</sup> The widespread unemployment and its societal impact has been much discussed, with particular reference to the youth who constitute a large part of the populace in the GCC. The GCC economies are expected to contract by 7.6% in 2020. This has meant the departure of a large number of migrant workers from the GCC, with the governments pushing for citizen labour in many job categories in order to keep unemployment under control. Saudi Arabia is expected to see the departure of 1.2 million migrant workers, while the populations of Oman and UAE are expected to contract by 4% and 10%, respectively.<sup>3</sup> The volatility in oil prices since 2014 has impacted the budgets of GCC economies and seriously limited their government's capacities for welfare spending. The situation is more alarming in countries with a large indigenous population, like Oman and Saudi Arabia. I will consider Oman as a case study, looking at the impact of Covid on its budget and speak of the fiscal tightening measures being initiated by its government, which are likely to be a harbinger of future developments in the region.

## **Energy State and Development**

The discovery of Oil in the Middle East led to major changes in the economies and social structures of the GCC nations. Oil, which became such an essential component of global industrial production and transport needs, created major cash surpluses for the governments as well as increasing their importance on the global stage. With the technology for exploration, extraction, and transportation from oil being provided by the Western nations that were also major consumers of the product, the GCC nations quickly integrated themselves into the global capitalist economy. However, with national oil companies being primarily state-owned (e.g., Saudi Aramco and Petroleum Development of Oman), the price of oil was controlled by the producers. This was accentuated with the establishment of OPEC, as since then prices were controlled by the manipulation of production and surpluses through collusions. The huge surpluses created through oil exports led to the creation of large sovereign wealth funds (SWF) for the GCC nations.

2 See Economic Prospects & Policy Challenges for GCC Countries, International Monetary Fund, October 2020

3 See Bloomberg. (2020): "Oxford Economics Sees Exodus of Expat Workers From Across Gulf", [article accessed 24 Sep 2020.

The SWFs are invested abroad in foreign banks and companies, infrastructure projects, and US treasury bonds, among other places. The foreign assets of the Saudi Arabia Monetary Agency (SAMA) are expected to reach 130% of country's GDP. Such investments can be treated as a geopolitical instrument, used by authoritarian regimes to buy political consent in foreign capitals. The structure created through such external rents is a key reason for the durability of the authoritarian Middle Eastern regimes, despite the occasional challenge.<sup>4</sup>

Domestically, the GCC regimes used their surpluses to co-opt political support by providing generous welfare schemes. The public sector was used to provide this welfare, which consisted of subsidies in water, electricity, and fuel as well as a zero-tax regime. A significant number of citizens continue to be employed in the public sectors, and public spending on infrastructure projects is a key driver of private sector income, although the return on investments for such projects remains low (Um, Straub, & Vellutini, 2009). This in turn has created a substantial private sector dependent on state patronage and the creation of interest groups with a tendency to prefer the status quo, making market reforms harder. This in turn has led to highly unbalanced labour markets and economies being largely dependent on oil export surpluses for their income.<sup>5</sup> For example, as of 2020, Oman generates about 72% of its revenue from the oil and gas sector (CBO, 2020).

## The Narrative of Covid-19 and its Global Impact

“Coronaviruses are a common virus family known to cause a range of diseases ranging from mild respiratory infection to severe pneumonia. This Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a new type of Coronavirus that has not previously been found in humans. The first case of this virus was reported on December 31, 2019 in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, People's Republic of China” (Oman Ministry of Health, 2020). Covid-19 has since developed into a devastating global pandemic. Other than causing significant loss of life and putting severe strain on the world's medical facilities, its economic impact is likely to last for a long time.

4 See Rethinking the Rentier Curse Repenser la malédiction de la rente, Adeel Malik <https://doi.org/10.4000/poldev.2266>.

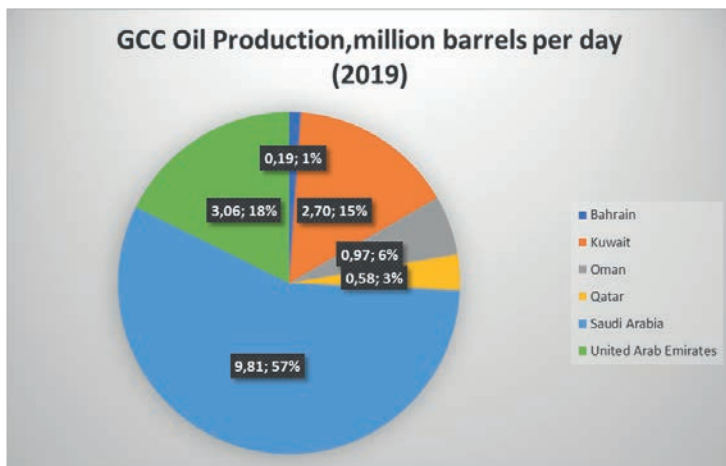
5 See Arezki, B. and Nabli, M. (2012) Natural Resources, Volatility and Inclusive Growth: Perspectives from Middle East North Africa, IMF Working Paper 12/111, (Washington, D.C: IMF), <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/cat/longres.aspx?sk=25891.0>.

The contagious nature of the virus led to governments imposing sweeping travel bans, which led to a drop in global travel. Coupled with a substantial reduction in the movement of goods across countries, there has been a drop in the demand for transportation needs for humans and materials. This in turn led to a drop in global crude oil demand, and the subsequent oil price crash which would see the benchmark Brent crude prices dropping to historic lows. A drop in global demand in general could lead to large-scale retrenchments across the industry, with many smaller businesses going out of business. The World Health Organization along with some other institutions has said in a statement that “the economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic is devastating; tens of millions of people are at risk of falling into extreme poverty” (International Labour Organisation, 2020).

### **The Gulf Cooperation Council**

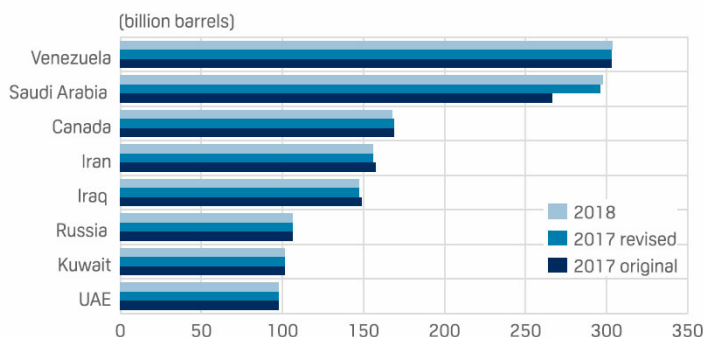
The Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) was set up in 1981 and consists of six countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The GCC was set up on the background of the Iran-Iraq war and can be called a culmination of the efforts of the ruler of Oman, Sultan Qaboos bin Said, who for years had advocated for regional co-operation among neighbouring states (Haas, 2013). Besides arranging economic co-operation, the organization has played an important role in regional stability and security as the various militaries participate in joint exercises. However, countries like Oman have at times pursued a foreign policy objective independent of the GCC, such as in its relationship with Iran, as well as its actions during the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen as well as during the recent blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia and UAE (Cafiero & Karasik, 2017)

### **Energy in the GCC, proven reserves, production and ...**



Source: IMF

## WORLD'S TOP HOLDERS OF PROVED OIL RESERVES



Source: BP's Statistical Review of World Energy

- As of December 2018, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries had combined proven reserves of 497 billion barrels of crude oil. This represents approximately 34% of the world's estimated proven crude reserves (KAPSARC, 2018).
- The total export volume of oil from all Gulf Cooperation Council countries was 13.3 million barrels per day (Puri-Mirza, 2020).

## Covid-19 in GCC

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has swept across the globe, has had a significant impact on the oil-rich rentier states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The period since March 2020 has seen a major drop in oil demand, as travel restrictions were put in place, which in turn has led to a major drop in global crude prices. The GCC monarchies have seen their budget deficits balloon as the revenues fell. The problems have been further exacerbated in countries with a high indigenous populace like Saudi Arabia and Oman, whose budgets were already under pressure before the pandemic. The governments in turn have reacted with a curtailment of energy subsidies, enhancing their tax regimes while at the same time increasing healthcare spending and providing aid to industry, especially small and medium enterprises. Overall, the pandemic presents several key challenges to the GCC economies. In this essay, I will first develop an understanding of the political economy of the GCC countries and speak of

their structural imbalances. I will then look at the economic cost and social consequences of the pandemic, and finally will look in-depth at Oman's economy as it emerges from the pandemic. This may give an indication of the likely direction that the GCC regimes will adopt.

The six GCC countries have remained absolute monarchies, with oil accounting for about 80% of government revenues (Vohra, 2017). The regimes in turn have used their oil fortune to keep their people contented by means of subsidies and assistance. The period between 2000-2008 saw Brent crude prices rise from USD 28.66/barrel to USD 96.94/barrel. This in turn led to substantial GDP growth rates among the GCC nations, with Qatar becoming the highest per capita income country in the world. The huge budget surpluses generated were used to provide generous subsidies for fuel, utilities, and water. In addition, substantial sums were spent on infrastructure development as well as on social welfare and job creation programs (Vohra, 2017). Oil prices fell sharply in 2009 to USD 61.74/barrel and witnessed a further dip in 2015 to USD 52.32/barrel (Energy Information Administration, 2021). A slowdown in the Chinese economy as well the growth of US shale oil production led to a glut in the global oil supply. While the supplies were stabilized through OPEC production cuts, the average price of oil has remained low. This in turn has led to significant budget deficits among the GCC nations of Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Bahrain, leading to cuts in social spending as well as attempts to diversify the economy.

The extremely unbalanced nature of the labour markets in the GCC constitutes a major challenge to economic reforms and diversification. Citizens are mostly engaged in the public sector with no link to productivity that makes a significant contribution to the economy. Saudi Arabia, for example, has about 65% of its employed citizenry engaged in the public sector, compared with the global average of 20% (Herb, 2019). A large amount of employment needs to be generated in the private sector to reduce government spending on salaries. Employing citizens in the private sector will, however, lead to a rise in private sector wages, and impact the cost of tradable goods, as well as lowering the productivity of citizen labour. As discussed in section 2, private enterprise in the rentier states of the GCC is primarily dependent for its revenue streams on infrastructure projects funded through public spending. This is evident from the fact that the vast majority of the SMEs are in traditional areas of the economy like trading and contracting. In Dubai, about 60% of the SMEs are in the trading sector. This



has limited their value-added contributions to the economy, and created much rent-seeking behaviour, leading to “business interests with a deep stake in the status quo” (Herb, 2019). The diminished role and importance of the private sector has meant its inability to challenge the state to initiate reforms, which are an imperative for economic diversification and employment generation, unlike in the liberal democracies of the West.

The long history of energy subsidies has led to a rising consumption of exportable hydrocarbons in the GCC nations. The average percent of GCC oil production consumed domestically rose from 14% in the 1980s to 24.7% in the last decade (British Petroleum, 2021). A subsidy regime has led to wasteful energy consumption habits. Such cannibalization of primary exports has placed serious encumbrances on the economy by undermining the rent stream. Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and UAE have lifted subsidies and created a differential energy pricing for their citizenries. Saudi Arabia and Oman have narrowed their subsidies by limiting them to the poorer sections of the society (Herb, 2019). Declining oil revenues have led to the imposition of a Value Added Tax (VAT) in several GCC nations since 2018. In summary, as the citizen populations grow and oil prices continue to fluctuate, the GCC economies are beset with deep structural imbalances. The regimes built around such imbalances face the daunting task of maintaining societal quiescence with a young, aspirational population.

One of the key impacts of the pandemic was to create global volatility in the oil markets. This in turn led to an unprecedented drop in oil prices, which in turn has severely limited the ability of GCC economies to provide fiscal support. The Brent crude is forecast at US \$41.7/barrel for 2020 and around US \$49.3/barrel for 2021. One can expect the growth rates to resume only late in 2022. The dual oil and COVID-19 shocks may lead Oman and Saudi Arabia to adopt more restrictive fiscal policies. The combined GDP of the GCC is expected to contract by 5.3%, in 2020 before recovering by 24% in 2021, still leaving the GDP at far below 2019 levels (Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, 2020). The steep fall in oil revenues has led to the governments of Saudi Arabia and Oman cutting their expenses between 20 and 30%. However, Saudi Arabia witnessed one of its largest falls in foreign assets in 20 years. While such shortfalls reinforce the need for economic diversification, they also undercut the means of supporting it, as the oil revenues have played a key role in such things as the delivery of healthcare and remote working (OECD, 2020).

Tourism represents a key component for economic diversification in oil-exporting countries. In 2019, the sector contributed 8.6% of GDP growth and 7 million jobs, or 8.8% of the total employed population across the GCC region (World Travel and Tourism Council Economic Impact Report, 2019). In the first half of 2020, the UN World Tourism Organization reported that the Middle East had experienced a 57% decline in tourist arrivals and a 42% drop-in hotel occupancy rates in July (UNWTO, 2020). The cancellation of mega-events like the Dubai Expo 2020 and the Haj pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia has put a strain on the country's economies. In GCC, Price Waterhouse Coopers estimates that around 400,000 jobs will be lost as a result of this crisis (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2020).

Small and medium enterprises (SME) constitute a significant number of business units and share of jobs in the GCC region, accounting for the employment of about 17 million people (Khamis and Hweij, 2016). The major sectors of the economy include hospitality, tourism, manufacturing, and construction, as well as oil and gas. With Oman promoting in-country value (ICV) initiatives, under which a substantial amount of contracting work is awarded to local companies in the oil and gas sector, its SMEs have assumed an increasingly important role as a growth driver (Petroleum Development of Oman, 2018). The pandemic has led to revenue losses and lack of cash flow or liquidity crunch, forcing many SMEs to become insolvent and go out of business. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has a significantly high level of unemployment, around 10%, with around 25% of youth unemployed (OECD, 2020). SME and entrepreneurship initiatives have been a major tool for reducing unemployment and diversifying the economy from its heavy reliance on the state and hydrocarbon revenue. The downside of the SME sector that likely to lead to increased unemployment and increased poverty levels (Callen, Abu-Ismaïl, & Momani, 2021). While the GCC economies have backed their SMEs with stimulus packages, including Oman, which announced schemes for the deferment of installment payments so that SMEs could ease out from their liquidity problems, the overall tightening of the hydrocarbon revenues leaves the governments with extraordinarily little room for maneuverability (Central Bank of Oman, 2020).

The pandemic and its economic impact in turn has had a major impact on the societies of the region. The MENA region has been characterized by staggering socio-economic inequalities, with the top 10% owning 64% of the wealth

(Alvaredo, Assouad, & Piketty, 2017). The governments have made considerable efforts during the pandemic to address these social gaps by reaching out to vulnerable households. A majority of women in the region are employed in some of the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic, like tourism and business travel. Most companies, being SMEs, are less resilient to crises, which in turn has led to temporary suspension or termination of the workforce (OECD, 2020). UN Women (2020) estimates that women in the Arab world will lose about 700,000 jobs as a result of the outbreak. Increased frustration among men due to job losses, deep-rooted gender inequalities, and movement restrictions have also increased women's exposure to domestic violence.

The MENA region has the world's highest rate of youth unemployment, and it is estimated that about 80% of the youth work in the informal sector of the economy. The same sectors have been severely impacted by the crises and this has led to higher youth unemployment and loss of income for many. This in turn may further erode the trust of the youth in their governments; a 2018 survey shows this trust to be at only 32% in the MENA region (UN News, 2020). Additionally, the pandemic has greatly increased educational inequalities, as e-learning has been difficult for youth without access to the Internet, a personal computer, or a quiet space at home (OECD, 2020).

Thus, the pandemic has led to the bottoming out of crude oil prices and a dramatic fall in revenues of the GCC and MENA countries. The social consequences have been far-reaching, especially on the most vulnerable sections of the populace, women, youth, and informal workers. The UN Economic and Social Commission for West Asia estimates that an additional 8.3 million people will fall into poverty in the region (UN News, 2020). The impending political and social instability could greatly test the region's fragile resilience. This leads to my final point, which involves taking a look at Oman's economy through the lens of the pandemic.

Oman is strategically located along the Straits of Hormuz, which is a transit route for a major amount of Middle Eastern oil. An ally of both the US and UK, it has maintained close ties with Iran for a long time, and was instrumental in brokering the nuclear deal between the US and Iran. It thus occupies a very significant role as a regional neutralizer. Since the Arab Spring protests in 2011, Oman has experienced significant increases in government expenditures in the civil ministries and the defence and security apparatus. Fluctuating oil prices since 2010 led

to a drop in government revenues, and increased spending would lead to government debt rising to 54% of GDP in Omani Rial (OMR) 16.5 bn. Such debts were caused by dipping into sovereign reserves and loans, which in turn has increased the cost of interest payments. At the current rate, the government has projected the debt to reach 89% of GDP by 2024, with interest payments accounting for nearly 20% of its fiscal resources, money that could have spent on social sectors and investments (National Program for Fiscal Balance, 2020). This in turn has seen a global lowering of Oman's sovereign credit rating, leaving the country vulnerable to economic shocks. The government of Oman in turn launched the Tawazum Program, aimed at implementing fiscal tightening measures. Among the initiatives implemented were a value-added tax, a personal income tax (for 2023), security and defence expenditure reductions by 5%, and reductions in energy subsidies. These reforms were expected to bring down the budget deficit by 2024 to about 1.44% of GDP. The pandemic, however, has put paid to the fiscal plans with the dual blow of drop in oil prices as a fraction of oil production due to OPEC production cuts, which in turn has led to a widening of the fiscal deficits. The government has thus been forced to come up with harsher measures, including the complete scrapping of energy subsidies, a reduction in defence expenditures by 10%, and capping all infrastructure development expenditures. There are also proposals to increase the VAT to 10% and to advance the start of personal income tax collection to 2022, instead of 2023 as previously planned. The government is also planning a privatization of state-owned enterprises and to sell part of its 60% stake in the national oil company to raise money for financing the deficits. There are also steps being taken to attract foreign direct investment through the setting up of special economic zones and relaxations of labour market rules (National Program for Fiscal Balance, 2020).

## Conclusion

The present economic model being followed by the GCC nations is likely to lead to economic difficulties in the long run. The primary problem has been the ever-increasing fiscal deficit, which has resulted from the oil price volatility, leading to a reduction in government revenues, a problem accentuated by the COVID pandemic. The pandemic has led to an aggravation of the already deep-rooted structural instabilities of a number of Middle Eastern economies. The rentier system long helped the regimes ensure the loyalty of the populace through a system of welfare subsidies. It also led, however, to the creation of an elite class and

much disaffection in a society with a large young populace seeking increased opportunities. This led to the Arab Spring, which in turn proved to be a catalyst for further expansion of the subsidy regimes, leading to further pressure on the finances of GCC governments with a high indigenous populace. Now, COVID-19 has pushed them closer to the edge of precipice. Oil markets are expected to remain volatile in the short- to medium-term, which is likely to further undermine the finances of these regimes. The tentative reform steps highlighted above need to be accelerated to ensure economic diversification, which in turn could lead to employment generation and reduce dependence on hydrocarbons. We have witnessed an element of flexible rentierism, with aggregate patronage remaining the same, as seen in the energy sector reforms. However, the depth of structural changes required for the economies to move to 'post-rentier' situation remains a major challenge (Herb, 2019).

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# 15

## BUSINESS AS USUAL, GREEN GROWTH, OR DEGROWTH? EXPLORING ENERGY TRANSITION PATHWAYS THAT THE UK COULD PURSUE POST COVID-19

*Eleanor Murray*

### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that the UK can respond quickly and effectively to a crisis...or has it? This paper will consider how the UK might approach a climate change mitigation energy transition in the post-COVID-19 era. It will explore three pathways that could be pursued by the UK: business as usual, green growth, and degrowth. The paper offers an explanation of the theoretical understandings that underpins each pathway, along with evidence that supports the likelihood of their implementation in the UK. 'Business as usual' indicates a classical economic approach that assumes that markets will incentivise ecologically-focused innovation when it is economically advantageous. In opposition to business as usual, 'degrowth' acknowledges the link between capitalism and climate change and considers that economic growth must be reversed. Green growth, or the pragmatic compromise, proposes a win-win solution that encourages economic growth and protects the environment. Ultimately, this paper predicts that 'business as usual' can be expected in the short term with a 'green growth' approach in sight for the long term.

### **Introduction**

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>1</sup> flights have been suspended, supply chains have shifted locally, public events have been cancelled, and remote working has become the norm. While these measures have been enacted in response

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing (May 2021), there have been over 150 million cases and over 3 million deaths reported worldwide.



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to a health and economic crisis, the outcomes are clearly aligned with the objectives of sustainability that policy makers and scientists have been advocating for decades (Cohen, 2020: 1).<sup>2</sup> Ibn-Mohammed et al. (2021) note that, globally, we have witnessed improvements in air quality, reductions in environmental noise, increased cleanliness of beaches, declines in primary energy use, and record low CO<sub>2</sub> emissions due to these measures (pp. 8-10). Both the climate crisis and the pandemic emphasise the deep interdependence between nature and humanity, and thus the pandemic offers critical insights and lessons for dealing with the climate crisis (Perkins et al., 2020, p. 2). As vaccine rollout increases in speed and the number of COVID-19 cases decreases, we must move forward with these lessons and transition the UK energy system in order to fight climate change.

As a socio-technical transition, decarbonisation poses complex dilemmas that require both multi-state cooperation and intra-societal engagement. This paper will focus on the state level, specifically that of the UK, since, while local action is vital to any change in society, the government possesses more power than local actors and can mobilise more resources, including money, positions of authority, and access to media (Avelino & Rotsmans, 2009, p. 559). Analysis at the national level is critical, and state policy and government commitment are imperative for emission targets to be reached vis-à-vis agreements such as the Paris Agreement.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, while political power over the last decade has been transferred to regional institutions and corporate actors, the state remains the central domain for policy formulation and enactment (Capasso et al., 2019, p. 397).

There are a diverse range of possible energy transition pathways that the UK could follow post-COVID-19; however, this paper will focus on just three: (1) 'business as usual', which is built on classical and neoclassical economic theory (Smith, 2005 [1776]), (2) 'green growth', underpinned theoretically by ecological modernisation and the Weberian tradition (Weber, 1968 [1922]), and (3) 'degrowth', which is rooted in Marxism (Marx, 1982 [1848]). Each section will detail the expectations of each scenario and offer evidence on their likelihood of implementation in the UK. The UK has been selected as the country of focus

2 In line with the Brundtland Commission Report (1987, p. 41), sustainability is understood as meeting the 'needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.

3 Adopted by 196 Parties at COP21, the Paris Agreement is a legally binding international treaty on climate change.

for this paper, due to the increased interest in the country in climate strategy in the run-up to COP26.<sup>4</sup>

## Business as Usual

The most likely scenario to consider that the UK could face in the post-COVID-19 era is business as usual. Globally, under this scenario we could expect to see attempts made to return to 'normal' trading relations and economic patterns, such as self-regulated socio-technical innovation, competition, and debt-enabled material consumption. All of these possibilities are underpinned by neoclassical economic optimisation (Wells et al., 2020, p. 32). Mirroring government initiatives introduced in Summer 2020, such as 'Eat Out to Help Out', UK citizens could expect to be encouraged to leave the house and start spending again to boost the economy (Cohen, 2020, p. 2). This future scenario was anticipated by the World Trade Organisation (WTO, 2020) in April of 2020, which forecasted a 13-32% fall in global trade in 2020 in comparison to 2019, but we can expect a resumption in growth year-on-year.

This pathway will be detrimental to the climate crisis and the UK's progress towards a long-term sustainable energy transition and net-zero targets. Market competition and technological innovation may lead to eco-efficiencies. However, these efficiencies may be broadly negated by overall consumption growth (Wells et al., 2020, p. 32). Moreover, restarting the economy may even result in postponing environmental measures and carbon-reduction regulations. Wells et al. (2020, p. 33) argue that even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there had been an erosion of the viability and legitimacy of international organisations, such as the World Health Organisation (WHO), the United Nations, and the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change. Consequently, without effective checks and balances from these organisations, the UK's following a 'business as usual' pathway may accelerate climate change.

Despite this, the short-term benefits of following a 'business as usual' pathway are compelling for the UK government. Many of the UK's citizens have suffered from a loss of wages while on furlough or have lost their jobs completely in the

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4 The UK will host the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) in Glasgow in November 2021. This summit will bring nations together to accelerate action towards the goals of both the Paris Agreement and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

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case of company dissolution. Under a representative democracy, government ministers are incentivised to appease those who have suffered financially and will be casting their votes in the next general election in just 3 years' time.

Furthermore, at 5 years or less, parliamentary election cycles are short and therefore do not encourage politicians to consider long-term plans for the UK. Sentiments within the Conservative Party suggest a disinterest in pursuing energy transition plans to the detriment of economic growth. At the Conservative Party conference in 2011, George Osborne, Chancellor at the time, argued that the UK should avoid green policies that would put the country 'out of business' or increase energy costs for companies and households. He went on to state that the UK should not cut carbon emissions at a faster rate than other European countries and that post-2020 carbon targets should be subject to review. This prioritisation of the economy over climate change concerns extends beyond Westminster; a 2012 public attitudes survey conducted by the UK Department of Energy and Climate Change confirmed that a majority of citizens are more concerned with economic issues than climate change (Geels, 2014, p. 33). While this survey data is now dated, similar results could be expected now considering the financial hardships that many citizens have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another fact to be considered is that coal is not yet dead. Existing, as all nations today do, in a globalised network, the UK continues to rely on burning fossil fuels. Despite China's committing to a target of peak CO<sub>2</sub> emissions no later than 2030, powerful stakeholders, such as the China Electricity Council, are lobbying for targets that would allow hundreds of new coal-fired power stations to be built between 2021 and 2025 (Myllyvirta et al., 2020). The revival of coal is not limited to outside the UK. In March 2020 plans to build a coal mine in Cumbria were approved by the County Council; the mine could produce 8.4m tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> per year, equal to the emissions from more than a million UK households. Plans are currently on hold while the government carries out a public inquiry following much public discontent and backlash from the opposition (Harrabin, 2021).

In summary, in terms of the potential impact on energy transition progress, 'business as usual' presents the most environmentally detrimental consequences. It would mean that, despite some minor eco-efficiencies encouraged by market competition, business operations would continue without concern for climate change.

## Green Growth

Green growth, as defined by the OECD (2011), is 'fostering economic growth and development while ensuring that natural assets continue to provide the resources and environmental services on which our well-being relies' (p. 9). Interest in green growth largely emerged following the 2008 global financial crisis. International institutions, such as the OECD, recognised green growth to be a 'win-win solution', as it aims to protect the environment on the one hand and maintain economic growth on the other (Capasso et al., 2019, p. 390). Wells et al. (2020, p. 32) argue that the COVID-19 pandemic may 'kick start' a transition to green growth, whereby we would see a rapid reduction in carbon emissions, followed by a new regime structure.

UK citizens could expect green growth to lead to the successful establishment of a circular economy, reduced consumption of fossil fuels, genuine de-coupling of energy consumption, and ecologically-focused technological innovation (Wells, 2020, p. 32). As an approach underpinned by ecological modernism (Meadowcroft, 2005, p. 482), the reliance on innovation is a significant feature of green growth. These innovations include, for example, the use of certain types of algae to capture CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from industrial wastewater (Lopes, 2015).

Green growth is an attractive pathway for the UK government, since resources, such as coal, are finite and thus, regardless of ecological concerns, alternatives to it will be needed. Capasso et al. (2020, p. 394) suggest that green growth will be predominantly driven by resource availability, opposed to climate-conscious decisions.

Evidence that the UK will follow a green-growth transition pathway can be found in the government's ambitious, incrementally increasing emission targets. Published in 2000, a government report titled 'Energy: The Changing Climate', states that the UK aims to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 60% by 2050 in order to meet global targets. Just 8 years later the Climate Change Act established a legally binding target of reducing emissions by 80% by 2015 above 1990 levels (Andrew-Speed, 2015, p. 303). However, this more recent target has not yet been met; as of 2020, UK emissions had only dropped by 43% since 1990 (Carvalho, 2021).

On the other hand, the UK committed to supplying 20% of its energy from renewable sources by 2020, in an attempt to rapidly transition away from a

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fossil-fuel-based energy system (Essletzbichler, 2012, p. 792). This target was surpassed and, as of 2021, renewable energy generates 43% of the UK's electricity compared to fossil fuels, which provide 38.5% (Buljan, 2021). Furthermore, the UK appears to be performing well on the global stage. According to the Environmental Performance Index, the UK is ranked 4th out of 180 countries, following Denmark, Luxembourg, and Switzerland (Yale, 2020, p. 3). This ranking, based on a data-driven summary of a state's sustainability, is based on 32 individual indicators, including CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, wastewater, stock status, marine protection, household solid fuels, sanitation, and drinking water (Yale, 2020, p. 2).

However, despite this positive image, we must ask: can green growth *really* offer a win-win solution? Academics, such as Redcliff (2005), argue that sustainable development, conserving the environment while continuing to pursue economic growth, is an oxymoron. Stoknes and Rockstrom (2018) concur and state that in practice, green growth is a continuation of conventional economic growth, 'just under a new label' (p. 41). As an approach, green growth has persisted because, while it signals a move towards socially inclusive and environmentally friendly practices, it has no set definition or clear target. As a result, green growth can only offer limited sustainable consumption and incrementally increasing efficiency, but disregards the ecological limits of the Earth system (Stoknes and Rockstrom, 2018: 41).

Furthermore, green growth is heavily dependent on technological innovation to solve environmental issues, in the hope that by combining old and emerging skills and technologies, we will be able to develop new green growth opportunities. However, proponents of green growth often fall victim to technocratic optimism (Capasso et al., 2019, p. 393).

To summarise, unlike 'business as usual', green growth offers an environmentally-conscious pathway to an energy transition in the UK. It is built on an understanding that a compromise can be made between economic development and environmental conservation. However, as detailed by academics such as Redcliff (2005), there is reason to believe that this compromise is both impossible and improbable, as the two are dichotomously opposed.

## Degrowth

In response to the criticisms of green growth and various intersecting critiques of the global capitalist economy, degrowth offers an alternative approach to energy transition. Some social scientists, such as Pitirm Sorokin, have argued that disasters, particularly those with considerable tragic consequences, tend to catalyse social change (Cohen, 2020, p. 1). The hope, from a degrowth perspective, is that in response to the devastation experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the exacerbation of existing inequalities, countries like the UK will take steps to reverse economic growth.

The theory of degrowth is built on the understanding that the current overexploitation of increasingly limited resources is drawing the world closer to its 'planetary boundaries: a dangerous limit that, if surpassed, would lead to environmental collapse' (Hepburns et al., 2014). Instead of investing in complex technological innovation, we should focus on the reality that deep decarbonisation cannot be accomplished by optimising existing systems, but only through radical transformation (Markard & Rosenbloom, 2020, p. 55). Reducing carbon emissions requires reducing production and consumption and, as a result, de-growing economies (Kallis, 2017:1).

If the UK were to follow a degrowth energy transition pathway, citizens could expect drastic de-consumption, a rejection of materialism, the rebalancing of work and production, the erosion of private wealth, and green taxes (Wells et al., 2020, p. 33).

In comparison to business as usual and green growth, it seems less likely that the UK will pursue degrowth. However, Mark Carney, former head of the Bank of England, provides us with a glimmer of hope. In an extract from his book, Carney highlights the danger that global capitalism and commodification impose on us, 'as we move from a market economy to a market society'. He notes that the logic of buying and selling not only applies to material goods, but now also governs environmental protection, the allocation of healthcare and education, and public safety (Carney, 2021). Here we see interesting similarities with Marx's critique of capitalism, such as the commodification of labour: 'Labour does not only create goods; it also produces itself and the worker as a commodity' (Marx, 1982 [1848]: 13).

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The principal issue with degrowth is the balance between poverty reduction initiatives and managed degrowth in ‘developing’ countries (Wells et al., 2020, p. 33). In response, Martínez-Alier (2012: 58) argues that the degrowth movement requires an environmental justice framework that accounts for the historical responsibility for environmental degradation. Bellamy Foster and Clark (2003, p. 195) estimated that, in terms of carbon emissions alone, the ecological debt owed by the Global North to Global South is \$13 trillion per year. Furthermore, building on unequal responsibility for climate change, Hickel (2020, p. 403) calculates that countries in the Global North are responsible for 92% of overshoot emissions beyond each country’s ‘fair share’. Similarly, Pablo Solón Romero, Bolivia’s Ambassador to the United Nations between 2009 and 2011, argued that ‘admitting responsibility for the climate crisis without taking necessary actions to address it is like someone burning your house and then refusing to pay for it’ (Martínez-Alier, 2012, p. 58).

In summary, while green growth is built on the assumption that economic development and environmental conservation can exist in harmony, degrowth, denying this, proposes a radical transformation. This transformation requires a global shift to the recognition that environmental degradation is caused by capitalist accumulation and exploitation, and thus to an acknowledgement of the historical responsibility for climate change. There are limited indications that this pathway is likely to be followed by the UK. However, considering the country’s colonial past and history of resource extraction in the Global South, it arguably is a pathway that the UK should be pursuing.

### **Conclusion**

I have explored three possible energy transition pathways that the UK could follow in the post-COVID-19 era: business as usual, green growth, and degrowth. From the evidence provided, we can expect the UK to pursue a business-as-usual approach in the short-term, in an attempt to restimulate the economy, as witnessed in the summer of 2020. However, as fossil fuels continue to decrease in availability and viability, the UK may eventually follow a green growth pathway, investing in renewable energy and technological innovation, all the while continuing to grow the economy. While a degrowth approach, particularly one driven by the Global North, offers a more sustainable future than green growth, it remains unattractive to UK politicians who are voted in by the public for short-term

democratic cycles. As mentioned, parliamentary election cycles are short and therefore encourage short-term policy decisions over building a long-term strategy. Without an incentive to build a sustainable and forward-looking approach, the UK may fail to deliver any coherent climate change mitigation energy transition in the post-COVID-19 era.

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PART **V**

**LEGACIES OF COVID-19 AND  
FUTURE IMPLICATIONS**



# 16.

## EGYPT: LEGACIES OF THE MODERN STATE AND THE COVID-19

*Mehmet Emir Turgutalp*

### **Abstract**

The key aspect of the Egyptian state is the role of the military that has held power for many years. As a prominent part of the Middle Eastern and Arab world, the history of modern Egypt has importance for the region's dynamics. Operating under foreign rule of different varieties, including Ottoman and British governance, the formation of the modern state is an important element of the overall Egyptian identity. This article attempts to analyse the formation of modern Egypt, and its legacies, particularly in light of the ability it has shown to manage the Covid-19.

### **Introduction**

The Covid-19 pandemic constituted an enormous challenge for all nations worldwide as it spreading increasingly since the beginning of the outbreak in early 2020. The spread of the Covid-19 virus has caused tragic death tolls across the globe. Furthermore, the subsequent closure of economic and human activity worldwide in order to manage the spread of the virus has caused most national economies to perform poorly. International businesses, supply chains, and global production have periodically been discontinued according to the ever-changing circumstances of the Covid-19 health crisis. As a result, the domestic management of the Covid-19 outbreak and its effects on national economies have been issues at the forefront of public awareness. Accordingly, countries have interacted with the Covid-19 outbreak in line with their economic and infrastructural capabilities. The ways in which different nations have aimed to tackle these aforementioned issues have also varied significantly based on their regimes and historical legacies (Gelfand et al., 2021). As the Covid-19 pandemic has been continuing globally for over an entire year, the outcomes of the pandemic-related measures set forward by various countries are currently unfolding. There have been significant differences

in the degree of success of governments that are actively trying to eradicate the Covid-19 outbreak. These varying outcomes of Covid-19 management by different countries have highlighted differences in their ability to respond (Alon, Farrell & Li, 2020). There is a correlation between a nation's form of government and historical legacy and how that nation has handled the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, authoritarian and autocratic states such as China and Singapore have performed exceptionally well in containing the spread of the Covid-19 virus (Tanne et al., 2020). The ability of these countries to maintain strong social control can be attributed to the authoritarian and autocratic tendencies in their governmental practices (Alon, Farrell & Li, 2020; Yang, 2021). These countries have relied on state enforcement rather than voluntary compliance in managing the Covid-19 outbreak. Through enforcement methods such as military patrols and drone surveillance techniques, these countries have been able to operate large-scale lockdowns and mass testing with minimal errors in their operations. On the other hand, democratic nations such as the US and France have been reliant on democratic governmental practices in order to maintain the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Democratic nations generally have faced domestic opposition as their democratic legacies have been inherently opposed to the invasion of citizens' privacy and rights (Pleyers, 2020). In democratic Western nations such as the US and the UK, the Covid-19 pandemic has been highly politicised. Accordingly, democratic general publics have internalised restrictive measures aimed at minimising the spread of the Covid-19 virus (Loomba et al., 2021). Consequently, different political ideologies have involved different attitudes towards the Covid-19 virus (Grossman, Kim, Rexer, & Thirumurthy, 2020). Many anti-lockdown protests have arisen in democratic nations such as the US and the UK, which are more reliant on voluntary compliance than state enforcement (Pleyers, 2020).

Similarly, all nations show correlations between their ability to manage the Covid-19 pandemic and their relevant political and historical legacies. As this article sets forth, the most prominent aspect of Egypt's legacy reflected in contemporary governance is the military's role. Similar to Egypt's foreign-influenced, turbulent, and authoritarian political history, the management of the Covid-19 pandemic in the nation has followed corresponding trends. The management of the domestic spread of the Covid-19 virus, as well as relevant law enforcement methods for minimising the spread in Egypt, have been turbulent and problematic. Accordingly, in this paper I highlight the apparent reflections of Egypt's political legacy that have shaped the nation's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the first section that follows, I explore the emergence of the modern state of Egypt, considering its socio-political nature. In the second section, I explore the economic developments involved in the formation of the modern Egyptian state. In the third section, I look at neoliberal developments in this formation. Finally, I will analyse the ways in which Egypt has tackled various challenges in the management of the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **The Emergence of the Modern State**

The beginning of the nineteenth century saw the rise of modern Egypt. In 1805, Muhammad Ali Pasha was appointed Viceroy of Egypt in the Ottoman Empire. The rapid developments in the economic sphere during Muhammad Ali's rule led to Egypt's outgrowing its status as a simple Ottoman province, and the addition of Sudanese territories solidified the way for Egypt to become an own empire of its own in 1822. Until that point, parallel to the Ottoman identity, the Egyptian army had consisted of many ethnic groups. Now, French assistance allowed Muhammad to create a military that consisted mainly of native Egyptian farmers (Al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007). While the formation of a native army was followed by the local production of military hardware and advancements in the economic sphere, public education in Egypt was established. The development of higher education in fields relevant to military activities such as engineering was followed by the importation of new technologies from abroad (Heyworth-Dunne, 2019). However, the decades after Muhammad's rule saw the military reduce its size and foreign influence entering Egypt. Accordingly, there were uprisings. There were both civilian uprisings derived from nationalist views, and military uprisings rooted in the dissatisfaction of native Egyptian army officials, as the British occupied the high ranks of the army. In order to maintain the uprisings, Khedive Tawfiq officially invited the British to occupy Egypt and control domestic opposition (Waskey, 2009). The British succeeded, and this foreign presence lasted until the mid-twentieth Century. The British occupation led to the Granville Doctrine and the Veiled Protectorate, which set forth the British government as ruler of Egypt (Richmond, 1977).

Egypt was not able to declare independence from this foreign rule until 1922. Even the 1922 Egyptian Declaration of Independence was tailored by the British and set out clauses regarding the Suez Canal, Sudanese territories, and state security that favoured them (Sigler, Beede & Blaustein, 1977). The inclusion of



these clauses obstructed the complete independence of Egypt. A constitution and general elections were established, followed by the formation of political parties. Nonetheless, the initial years of the independent state saw parliaments repeatedly dissolved by the British-backed King Faud (Vatikiotis, 1991). The main political aim of all of Egypt's governments was to renegotiate the clauses of independence to achieve complete sovereignty. In 1929, the king dissolved yet another government, which led to a three-year suspension of parliament (Al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007). During this era, the nation became well-acquainted with public demonstrations and violence in the political sphere. Furthermore, the British, the Egyptian royal family, and the Egyptian parliament emerged as the three principal agencies of the Egyptian government. The existence of multiple authorities hindered the development of a liberal Egypt (Al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007). The Society of Muslim Brethren was formed under the leadership of Sheikh Hasan al-Banna during this era (Mura, 2012). The fundamentalist views of the Brotherhood spread through Egypt and created a wave of Islamic revival that preached independence from foreign rule (Mitchell, 1993). Migration to urban zones and the overpopulation of contemporary Egypt also has their roots in this era (Al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007; Davis, 2014; Joel, 1989). Decades of internal migration to cities led to Egypt's infrastructures being concentrated in urban zones, and they were often lacking in the nation's non-urban regions. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the mismanagement of decades of internal migration and integration have been highlighted, as the limited infrastructure caused significant hardships with respect to the provision of adequate healthcare and other services. By 1936, the Egyptian United Front had initiated the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty, which specified the withdrawal of British troops from Egypt, excluding the Suez Canal (Morsy, 1984). WWII led to the invasion of Egypt by the Italian and German forces before the victory of the Allies (Cooper 1978; Rodogno, 2008). More domestic protests arose during the war, as food shortages led to rationing. At the end of WWII, Egypt became a United Nations member. The years following WWII saw Egypt and other Arab states declare war against Israel in 1948, and later the repression of the Muslim Brotherhood (Hopwood, 1991). Accordingly, violence spread throughout Egypt, and the prime minister and the Brotherhood's leader al-Banna were both assassinated (Stanton, 2012). Further violence was directed at the British, as guerrilla warfare was conducted against military bases in the Suez Canal (Al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007). The continual violence led to the British acting against Egyptian forces. Consequently, violence in the public sphere increased, as a series of violent demonstrations at the beginning of 1952 took place in Cairo (Reynolds, 2012).

By July 1952, the Egyptian military had organised a coup and deposed the British-backed monarchy as well as the government. In 1953, the Egyptian Republic was declared (Botman, 1991).

The revolution, as it came to be known, yielded the first native regime in modern Egypt, one the general public could identify as theirs. The Revolutionary Command Council, which consisted of generals under the leadership of Gamal Abdel Nasser, monopolised power in Egypt (Bagley, 1956). The constitution and the parliament were abolished, and a three-year military rule was put in place. Soldiers rapidly replaced ministers and other authorities, as previously empowered bureaucrats and politicians were removed from the political arena (Al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007). The establishment of the army's dominant role and the role of military personnel in the political sphere during this era has been imprinted on the Egyptian identity ever since. At the same time, negotiations over the sovereignty of the Suez Canal started (Stephens, 1973). By 1956, British troops were removed from the canal, and Sudanese territories gained their independence from Egypt (Woodward, 1980). Thenceforth, an autonomous foreign policy started to take shape. Nasser initiated a campaign for Egypt to become the leading state in the Arab world, as he criticised Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan for becoming allies of Western powers (Kerr, 1971). The non-aligned status of Egypt that was established in this era led to the US and Soviets competing for influence in Egypt during the Cold War era (Quandt, 1977). As the Suez Canal became nationalised, and this started to cause economic hardships to Britain and France, a tripartite attack alongside Israel against Egypt was formed in 1956. This attack was concluded by the United Nations (Abernethy, 2013). The emergence of the decolonisation period in the Global South led to the rise of Nasser's status and of pan-Arab attitudes across the Middle East and North Africa. As a result, the Baath Party of Syria emerged as an ally of Egypt. By 1958, Nasser entered Egypt into a union with Syria and Yemen, creating the United Arab Republic. Nasser was elected President of the union, and a constitution that abolished political parties in all territories was set forth (Jankowski, 2002). Egyptians occupied executive positions in Syria under the head of military intelligence, Abdel Hamid al-Sarraj. The Syrian bourgeoisie and general public quickly turned sour against the strict rule by Egypt, and its promotion of a nationalised economy. The absence of Syrian personnel in high ranks of the military led the Syrian army to expel Nasser's government in 1961 (Al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007). Following the separation, Egypt continued to have a one-party political system. The Liberation Rally Party in Egypt had changed its

name to the National Union after the unification with Syria and Yemen. In 1962, the Arab Socialist Union emerged as Egypt's single legitimate party (Al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007). The military regime expanded its reach throughout Nasser's rule as the intelligence service, known as Mukhabarat, started to spy on the general public and associates of Nasser (Sirrs, 2010). Since then, the Egyptian population has been long used to the suppression of its privacy and other rights by the government forces. In contemporary times, the illiberal legacy has been reflected in the implementation of restrictive lockdown measures in Egypt. Accordingly, the limitations to human rights and the constraints on privacy that were part of the management of the Covid-19 Pandemic were not new phenomena in Egypt. In 1967, Nasser's Egypt engaged in a war with Israel, what Israel and the West call the Six-Day War. The Egyptian military was defeated, its air force was destroyed, and some of its territories occupied (Oren, 2017). As the Israeli forces advanced to Sinai and the Egyptian military faced grave difficulties, Nasser's regime started to crumble. Many high command army personnel resigned, and army protests called for freedom of the press and democratisation (Al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007). Burdened by these domestic challenges and hardships including the Israeli occupation of Sinai, Nasser died in 1970. Following Nasser's death, Anwar Sadat became President of Egypt, quickly changing the nation's direction away from Nasser's vision (Osman, 2013).

Sadat's initial years in power were concentrated on the war with Israel. With the funding of Saudi Arabia and Russia, Egypt gained its territories back from the Israeli occupation (Rosenberg, 2003; Scherer, 1978). Sadat emerged as a Western ally and initiated peace with the US-backed Israel (Aulas, 1982; Karawan, 1994). The Camp David accords of 1978 led to Egypt's becoming alienated from much of the Arab world following its declaration of peace with Israel (Quandt, 2015). Egypt's long history of dependence on foreign capital and cooperation has continued in recent times. During the Covid-19 Pandemic, Egypt heavily relied on foreign aid and loans for both the domestic containment of the virus and the vaccination processes. While the Muslim Brotherhood was freed during the Sadat era, his rule did not satisfy the general public's expectations for liberalisation. Censorship was common, and political parties were suppressed and shut down. Although less repressive than Nasser's, Sadat's Egypt was still corrupt and did not welcome domestic opposition (Hinnebusch, 1981). Corruption and the suppression of opposition in Egypt are still present in contemporary times. Although the levels of suppression and manifest corruption vary in different periods, they

are highly evident during crises. The uneven provision of healthcare during the Covid-19 Pandemic and the spreading of biased pandemic-related information have highlighted the similar contemporary challenges. At that time, both religious groups and the general public started to oppose Sadat's regime, which promoted Westernisation and the interests of economic elites. During a military parade in 1981, Sadat was unexpectedly assassinated. Following Sadat's death, Vice-President Hosni Mubarak became President (Kahana and Stivi-kerbis, 2013). Mubarak, an officer in the Air Force, had strong relations with the army, police force, and other Arab states (Al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007).

Mubarak's regime solidified the military's influence on the government and the parliament. Islamism and the media were heavily suppressed during Mubarak's rule. Corruption, violation of human rights, hereditary rule, and repressive governance were common. Mubarak's family entered the political arena, and his son Gamal Mubarak emerged as an important figure (Brownlee, 2007). Consequently, public protests and anti-government groups began to form against the regime (Bishara, 2015; Shorbagy, 2007). Islamic groups proved their ability to identify with the middle and lower classes, while anti-Mubarak ideologies grew among the public (Guirguis, 2012; Osman, 2013). In February 2011, the June 30 Revolution, or Second Egyptian Revolution, took place, and Mubarak handed power to the Armed Forces (El-Bendary, 2013). Following Mubarak's resignation, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces centralised all executive powers and abolished the parliament as well as the constitution. Many officials in Mubarak's regime, including Mubarak himself, were put on trial for corruption and the mis-handling of public demonstrations (Osman, 2013).

In 2012, general elections were held, and Mohamed Morsi, who had close links with the Muslim Brotherhood, became President of Egypt. Morsi's rule was the first time that Egypt had had a civilian regime; it lasted briefly (El-Bendary, 2013). Also, in the transitional period of rule by the Armed Forces, they had introduced constitutional decrees that limited the next president's power and gave the military to have authority over legislation and administration of the economy (Sharp, 2012). Morsi's civilian regime lasted briefly, due to poor governance. As the public turned sour towards the regime, the military sought to retake power from civilian rule. Accordingly, a military coup under the leadership of General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi took place in 2013 (Hamzawy, 2017). Following the coup, the Muslim Brotherhood was declared a terrorist group. The Brotherhood and

pro-democracy groups were heavily suppressed and persecuted, through the new constitution produced by Sisi's regime (Darwich, 2017). After a questionable election process in 2014, Sisi was elected President (Sanyal, 2015). Today, Sisi's regime operates an authoritarian rule, with repressive policies.

### **Capitalist Developments**

Spending his initial years forming a centralised authority, and later, as Viceroy of Egypt, Muhammad Ali Pasha focused on military and economic development (Dodwell, 2011). In order to achieve self-sufficient agricultural production and export, industrialisation was needed. Industrialisation started in the military, as Egypt started to produce equipment locally. Textile factories were established for the production of cotton, silk, and cashmere. As production increased, new trade routes formed, and the military's expansion continued for the sake of the safety of the routes (Al-Sayyid Marsot, 1984). Egypt sold grains to the British during the Peninsular War. The income accumulated from the grain trade allowed for the establishment of an irrigation system, which led to multiple crops a year. The perennial irrigation system allowed Muhammad's Egypt to sustain a sufficient production level for exports, and generally to participate in the newly industrialised world economy (Al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007). In the decades following Muhammad's rule, Egypt experienced a shift towards prioritising agriculture over industrialisation. The most prominent infrastructural developments of this period were the establishment of railways and the Suez Canal (Al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007). The construction of the Suez Canal, in 1869, and various domestic projects led to significant financial struggles, and forced Khedive Ismail to seek loans in order to cover debts to the Suez Canal Company and various European banks (Baer, 1956). As this method failed to recover finances, Khedive Ismail was deposed, and Tawfiq became the ruler of Egypt under heavy foreign influence. Tawfiq's rule saw the acquisition of the Suez Canal by the British, and the Law of Liquidation, which led to heavy taxation (Al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007). Tawfiq's Egypt benefited from foreign-influenced economic stimulation, and led to British control over the Egyptian administration, to the Sudan War, and to foreign military dominance. Egypt became a supplier of raw materials to Europe, and tobacco and cotton production were heavily taxed in the domestic market (Richmond, 1977). As the agricultural sector expanded, the need for water supplies that would feed the irrigation systems grew. In 1902, a dam project started alongside the Nile, but caused many hardships to landowners and farmers, as the project struggled with drainage and

subsoil water problems (Cookson-Hills, 2013). Similar problems were present in the later dam projects in Aswan in the 1960s, as the need for water supplies increased due, as the population increased greatly, in Egypt as elsewhere, across the twentieth century (Al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007). British involvement in Egyptian internal affairs was solidified during this era.

Soon after Egypt's independence in 1922, the Great Depression that began in 1929 led, aided by weak governance, to much deprivation. Egypt still lacked minimum wages and labour unions at this time. Public demonstrations continued, as repressive governments fell one after the other, all lasting briefly (Al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007; Joel, 1989; Vatikiotis, 1991). In 1930s Egypt, political violence and famines were both common. In the 1940s, Egypt saw the formation of anti-foreign ideologies. In order for them to materialise, the need for industrialisation and economic stimulation became apparent. Accordingly, Bank Misr was founded, and labour unions developed as the employed population grew (Al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007).

In Nasser's Egypt, wealth distribution laws required that land ownership be limited. The economy of Egypt under Nasser improved due to industrialisation. Nasser expanded the production of textiles and agricultural products (Al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007). In 1955, Nasser initiated the production of iron and steel in Helwan. Although the production struggled initially, once the local market demands were satisfied, foreign companies started to invest in Egypt (Al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007; United Nations, 1957). Imports were limited, and factories started to produce home appliances. Egypt started to receive loans from East-bloc powers, using for domestic projects such as the High Dam (Holbik and Drachman, 1971). Nonetheless, the expenses of the highly-expanded military became challenging to manage. Dominated by the military, Egypt soon turned corrupt, resulting in a weak rule of law and economic mismanagement (Cook, 2012). Many banks, including the National Bank and major businesses, became nationalised and were placed in the public sector with majority ownership by the state (Johnson, 2021). Further wealth distribution laws caused land ownership to be limited once again, and heavy taxes were placed on high-income citizens (Al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007; Margold, 1957). The wealth distribution laws and nationalisation proved helpful in creating limited capital that could be invested in more domestic projects. Regardless, due to corruption and lack of infrastructures, tax collecting never operated successfully. The military engagements in Yemen and later in

the Six-Day War in 1967 were both detrimental to the already fragile Egyptian economy (Ferris, 2014). Accordingly, many domestic projects and existing infrastructures failed, as dependency on foreign aid from East-bloc powers became crucial for survival. Similarly, the lack of adequate infrastructures and high levels of corruption have hindered Egypt's ability to manage the Covid-19 pandemic recently. Informal networks have controlled the allocation of fundamental medical care due to corruption and the insufficient implementation of relevant regulations. In addition, the lack of infrastructures, especially in non-urban regions, have made it almost impossible to implement and regulate Covid-19 related laws and healthcare provisions.

### **The Neoliberal Approach**

Sadat's regime, which began as he took power upon Nasser's death in 1970, shifted away from Nasser's state-oriented economic policies and promoted a neoliberal capitalist approach (Aoudé, 2021). The Egyptian bourgeoisie prospered, and free enterprise increased in the open market economy. Foreign direct investments were welcomed, for which cheap Egyptian labour was made available (Al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007). However, as foreign debt proved to be unmanageable, Egypt became reliant on aid from the US for food subsidies (Burns, 1985). Embracing a capitalist ideology and working with the International Monetary Fund, Egypt became an ally of the Western powers. The new direction in Egypt's economic planning led to the working class and the military government itself facing economic hardships, as the open market policies caused high inflation. Following Camp David, the US became a significant aid provider (Waterbury, 2014). As oil production began, Egypt started to satisfy domestic demand and thus initiated oil exports (Moench, 1988). Tourism and the Suez Canal also proved helpful in accumulating income. Nonetheless, the domestic economic landscape favoured the bourgeoisie, and the income gap between social classes grew (Al-Sayyid Marsot, 2007).

Quickly restructuring the nation's economic strategy, Mubarak, upon succeeding Sadat after the latter's assassination in 1981, engaged in structural adjustments that promoted the entry of foreign currency into Egypt (Osman, 2013). Mubarak's regime saw the foreign debt reduced and subsidies operate more efficiently, as Egypt worked with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Momani, 2005). By the early 2000s, privatisation was being encouraged, pension systems were established, the domestic currency had a floating exchange

rate, and a new tax reform was introduced (Ikram, 2006). Mubarak welcomed foreign direct investment and improved the urban infrastructures. However, the changes were slow, and the majority of the working class struggled financially as the nation faced a housing crisis. The struggling working class received medical and financial assistance from Islamic groups (Osman, 2013). Informal networks have been crucial for the Egyptian population during the Covid-19 pandemic as non-state actors such as religious groups and organisations have proved their ability to aid the general public. Many families and communities have turned to one or more of them for both financial and medical assistance during the nationwide lockdowns. It also did not help that Mubarak's Egypt had a concentration of ownership in most sectors, with the wealthy elite controlling production (Springborg, 2019). Before the 2011 Revolution, many protests had turned violent, as high inflation and heavy taxation angered the general public. Such resentments led to the forced resignation of Mubarak and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood under the newly-elected Mohamed Morsi. However, Morsi's government, which lasted briefly, as the Egyptian military organised a coup soon after the elections, saw a reduction in food, petrol, and gas production and a drastic decrease in subsidies. There were regular water and electricity cuts, as inflation increased (Letourneau, 2018). In this context, the Muslim Brotherhood and Morsi proved unable to govern the nation. Following the military coup, Sisi's military-influenced rule has focused on economic stimulation through the help of foreign aid from the Gulf States and the IMF. At the same time, water scarcity and the Ethiopian Renaissance Dam threaten Egypt's livelihood. In addition, high unemployment and low foreign currency income have caused economic difficulties for Sisi's Egypt (Letourneau, 2018).

## COVID-19

Under the leadership of Sisi, Egypt has witnessed economic improvements in recent years. In 2016, Egypt received a \$12 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund and actively participated in its Extended Fund Facility Program (Elnagar, 2016). In 2019, Egypt's economy grew by 5.6%, as the nation received around \$27 billion from remittances, \$6 billion from the Suez Canal, and an impressive \$13 billion from the tourism sector (World Investment Report 2019). In 2020, as the Covid-19 Pandemic emerged, it was apparent that all three sources of revenue generation were very much affected by global market trends. In addition, Egypt's informal economy has suffered significant losses. Initially, Sisi's Egypt



cut interest rates, exempted non-performing loans, and provided additional credit lines for small and medium-sized businesses, to ease the burden on the informal sector (Mabrouk, 2020; Zaazou and Abdou, 2021). The government introduced emergency laws that include curfew hours and distance-working. Also, liquidity in the stock market was increased, while interest rates were lowered. The government assisted the tourism industry, which was given credit facilities, and companies were banned from dismissing workers. As the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated, Egypt once again turned to the International Monetary Fund, and received further loans that added up to around \$8 billion (Elnagar, 2020). The effect of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Egypt has been disproportionate, with low-income, rural/agrarian, and younger populations suffering the most. This has led to informal relations such as borrowing money or receiving charity between different social and income classes in Egypt (Atallah, 2020).

The healthcare system in Egypt has also been under extreme pressure. This is due to both slow decision-making processes in the beginning months of the Covid-19 pandemic by the Egyptian authorities, and the lack of sufficient infrastructures to maintain the operation of the system. The healthcare infrastructures are concentrated in urban zones, and are short in supply in non-urban zones. The general public could only access pandemic-related services such as testing, ventilation, and assisted isolation through private funding. This led to private hospitals taking advantage of the pandemic by charging citizens for basic medical assistance, as the government failed to regulate the private health sector (Atallah, 2020). Egypt witnessed a significant increase in the number of recorded cases between April and May in the month, this year, of Ramadan. This is mainly due to the weak rule-of-law present in the daily implementations of restrictive measures. The use of masks, social distancing, and general awareness, have all been low regardless of the newly-introduced pandemic-related laws. Such occurrences were more common in low-income parts of the nation, further accelerating the spread of the virus (Battouty, 2020). In order to ease the burden on the healthcare system, the government introduced further restrictions, as flights in and out of the country were limited, public spaces shut down, and police checks to identify breaches of restrictive measures became common (Gaye, Agbajogu & El-Oakley, 2021).

Egypt's revenues decreased by just under \$8 billion as expenditures increased. As the Central Bank was due to keep paying international debts, Sisi introduced new economic policies. Capital gains were suspended until 2021, and both land and

income taxes, as well as state pension payments, were deferred (Elnaggar, 2020; Gaye, Agbajogu & El Oakley, 2021). The industrial sector, which accounts for more than 10% of employment in Egypt, has also been affected dramatically by the pandemic. As global supply chains broke down, allocation of raw materials and production was disrupted. Furthermore, the supply-demand relation could not be maintained, as, globally, exports ceased. As the domestic market was also facing grave economic hardships and the daily demands were more essentials-oriented, the industrial sector nearly stopped (Elnaggar, 2020).

Currently, Sisi's Egypt is in the process of rolling out the vaccination process. The Covid-19 pandemic is still unfolding, with many nations still working to minimize the spread of the virus. Furthermore, selected countries have started the vaccination process, partly to end their economic and social lockdowns. Egypt is in the first steps of rolling out the Covid-19 vaccination, as it has received vaccination kits from China (Michaelson, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

The correlation between incumbent regimes and their abilities for managing the Covid-19 pandemic is a newly-emergent phenomenon. Nations' efficiency in tackling the pandemic has been highly dependent on their capabilities and regime types. As highlighted in the first section, autocratic and authoritarian regimes may have advantages regarding the containment of the spread of the virus. On the other hand, democratic nation-states have faced challenges due to their complex bureaucratic governmental practices and domestic socio-political dynamics. Regardless, this correlation is also highly affected by nations' relevant political histories. Accordingly, some autocratic nation-states have successfully tackled the pandemic, whereas others have not. Likewise, in the case of Egypt, the legacies of the formation of the modern state and the dominant role of the Egyptian military have been highly reflected in the nation's ability to tackle the pandemic. The formation of the modern state of Egypt has seen the nation transform its economic, political, and social characteristics. The transformations have varied according to the relevant period of time involved, as well as the global and regional dynamics. As highlighted in this article, the transformations involved corresponded with tendencies and expectations left over from previous regimes, and so have followed authoritarian tendencies. The highly turbulent formation of the modern state of Egypt has been reflected in the nation's contemporary struggles

with the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the roles of foreign influence, foreign capital, and foreign cooperation, all legacies of the formation of the modern state of Egypt, have also been highly apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic. Accordingly, it is plausible that the way in which Egypt has interacted with the Covid-19 pandemic is deeply rooted in and is highly influenced by the formation of the modern state.

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## THE LEGACY OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY EUROPEAN COLONIALISM, AND COVID-19 IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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### **Abstract**

European colonialism, in the nineteenth century, brought far-reaching changes to the world order, creating sharp differences between regions in the world. With the emergent use of terms such as ‘Global North’/‘Global South’, the world has been divided along lines that give continuing relevance to the colonial legacy. Among its effects are those that come into view in analysing the different ways the consequences of the current pandemic have been handled by various countries, often causing drastic damage to their economies, limiting political activities, or putting a new burden on their development goals. It is clear that the levels of various countries’ management of the results of COVID-19 are different, and this difference can be explained partly through the perspective of their colonial past. This article aims to critically analyse the impact of European colonialism on Papua New Guinea’s ways of dealing with the global pandemic. The case of Papua New Guinea was specifically chosen, as it is among the countries with the lowest number of registered covid cases, and the situation there is not a subject of broad publicity. The colonial rule of Germany and Britain over the territories of Papua New Guinea has had many enduring effects on its economy and politics, in such a way that it may be considered as among the major causes of the nation’s struggle with the pandemic and its prospects for recovery.

### **Introduction**

In this paper, I discuss how nineteenth century colonialism continues to impact the Global South,<sup>1</sup> and how the implications of COVID-19 have affected Papua

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1 The term ‘Global South’ is used to refer to those countries that were once colonized; they have

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New Guinea. Since the inception of the global pandemic, the Global South has suffered heavily compared to the Global North, and there are several reasons for this substantial difference. The roots of the problem stem from the colonial period, since imperialism has shaped the modern world order and managed to establish new attitudes toward the separation of power, changing the economics and politics of the Global South.<sup>2</sup> This paper focuses specifically on the example of Papua New Guinea, as the history of this country is deeply rooted in nineteenth-century European colonialism. Even though the extent of the spread of COVID-19 within Pacific Islands nations has been less than in the Global North, the pandemic has still badly damaged Papua New Guinea's economy and standards of living, due to certain features of it acquired in colonial times. These features, including political instability, low living standards, and economic dependency, have enhanced the consequences of the global pandemic, making further recovery a more complex process.

In order to understand the origins of these problems and evaluate the implications of the global pandemic on Papua New Guinea, this paper is divided into two sections. In the first, I discuss the impacts of nineteenth-century colonialism on Papua New Guinea and on the nation's position in the global arena. In the second section, I analyse the impacts of COVID-19 on Papua New Guinea and the ways it has managed them.

### **The Global South and Colonialism**

The modern distribution of world power has been broadly recognized as being divided between developed countries, often referred to as the 'Global North', and the under-developed and undeveloped ones of the 'Global South'. This classification is based on a geopolitical simplification, as the majority of developed countries are located in the north, while the majority of under- and undeveloped ones are in the south, though in fact, 'Third World or the South is becoming a

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lower incomes than the nations of the 'Global North' with their more advanced industries and technologies. see Sinah Theres Kloß (2017), 'The Global South as subversive practice: Challenges and potentials of a heuristic concept', 11(2), *The Global South as Substantive Practice*, pp. 1-17, Published By: Indiana University Press.

2 The term 'imperialism' in general has been defined as the ability of powerful states to expand their territorial control beyond their boundaries. In this article I focus on the economic and political control of Global South by the states and military in Global North. see Tony Brewer, (1990), *Marxist Theories of Imperialism: A Critical Survey*, Routledge, London.

world-wide social category, rather than a geographically divided one' (Randall, 2004, p. 43), because the difference is now internal to most countries and major cities. In any case, the idea here is basically that of dependency theory, which holds that a lack of economic potential, along with poverty and low living standards, existed in the Global South that was largely caused by the fact that the majority of under-developed countries are ex-colonies of European powers, which started the massive process of colonization in the nineteenth century.

While the European scramble for Africa was happening, the same European powers, including the British, the Germans, and the French, were seeking territories in the Pacific region, including what is now Papua New Guinea (Brookfield, 1972, pp. 20-23). This territory eventually fell under the colonial control of both the Germans and the British, who partitioned it between them. The legacy of colonialism in PNG includes its economic weakness and lack of productive potential (due to the inefficient distribution of territory's resources).

Germany was relatively inexperienced in colonizing territories, and its colonial period lasted only 30 years, until the breakdown of the German Empire after its loss in World War I. Thus, "when it took possession of New Guinea ... she was a newcomer on the colonial scene" (Mühlhäusler, 1975, p.96). Unable to maintain strong economic activity within its colonies, Germany instead tried to promote German commerce. Its well-established companies mostly focused on securing favourable financial terms at home, by emphasizing copper extraction and importation to Europe, thanks to the available cheap labour force (Overlack, 1973, p. 131). One of the main agents in this process was the New Guinea Company (Neu-Guinea Kampagnie), created in 1884 and 'exercising full jurisdiction, and with the right to occupy unclaimed land in the name of the government' (p. 135). This company contributed to the development of agriculture in New Guinea (and, eventually, agricultural exports). Indeed, Germany 'devoted unparalleled energy and dedication to the agricultural development of the country', to the point of over-concentration (Overlack, 1973, p. 138). One of the main objectives of the New Guinea Company was selling land to settlers who were expected to arrive in a flood, though eventually its focus returned to plantation agriculture.

The resulting dominance of the agricultural sector over other sectors created an imbalance that may have retarded and limited the development of infrastructure in New Guinea. According to World Bank statistics, agriculture today still

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dominates the rural economy of Papua New Guinea, which is a possible reason for its underdevelopment, as economic diversification is an important contributing factor in a nation's economic development.

British rule of the territory of Papua was largely driven economically by protectionist motives, with restrictions placed on foreign competitors. Nevertheless, "while the British Government greatly profited from this economic activity, it had no intention of providing direct services to the indigenous people so that they could develop toward self-government and independence" (Kulwaum, 1995). Consequently, reliance on Papua's rich natural resources as a boost to the British economy involved exercising a total control over the territory, to the point of keeping out other European influences, which in turn restricted Papua's people from being able to independently use those resources and self-govern their own economic activity. Today, the PNG is considered a seriously underdeveloped country, because of its imbalance of trade in goods, a surplus of exports of natural resources over imports. This was not intended by the colonizers (Sarsenov, 2020), yet their choice to emphasized export activity, which favoured their own development within the global arena, would seriously impact the economy of Papua New Guinea for a long time to come.

The European colonialism of the nineteenth century also left an impact on the politics of the Global South. In the German case, the lack of experience in colonization played a significant role, since 'unlike the British, the Germans expected much from their new Pacific colony and governed it with harsh impatience' (Firth, 2008, p. 361).

In many cases, attempts by colonial powers to create modern governments in their colonies only led to political instability, whose legacy remains active today, because the ex-colonies lacked the knowledge needed to develop an effective approach toward self-governance (Kulwaum, 1995, p. 2). The Germans established an administration with the appointment of 'village officials who were accountable to regional officials, called "luluai," and through them to the central authority'. This system put the territory of New Guinea under German control, both directly and indirectly, because the selection of 'luluais' was not based on traditional leadership patterns and operated in German interests through administrative convenience (p. 3). This system made it difficult for Papuans to later build the common ground for a stable political system. No stable political system was

established by the British either, who found that 'there was no central hierarchical authority which the British could use in an effective system of governance' (Kulwaum, 1995, p. 4). As mentioned, Papua New Guinea is a highly underdeveloped country that is 'commonly perceived as politically unstable' (May, 2012, p. 53). The connection between this instability and colonial rule in the nineteenth century could be seen from another perspective: European imperialism limited the establishment of a strong political base during the colonization period, while afterwards, the consequence of extended European control resulted in an incapacity of self-governance. This remains true even if the colonial past is not the only reason for this.

Of course, none of this means that colonialism had no benefits for the colonized. The 'Germans took seriously their responsibility to improve the status of the native peoples, in accordance with the task of a civilising agency' (Overlack, 1973, p. 151). One effect was on cultural diversity, since it would come to mean that all three languages would be spoken: English, German, and Pidgin. The Germans did not insist on the use of their language, which they intended only for use among themselves, while they also did not want to enable the promotion and spread of English, the language of the rival European power (Mühlhäusler, 1975, p. 94). Some of the German-introduced institutions, like 'plantations and the police force, greatly increased the speed at which stabilization took place', thus promoting the development of cultural diversity (Mühlhäusler, 1975, p. 106).

### **Managing Covid-19 in Papua New Guinea**

We may conclude that the example of Papua New Guinea and the control over this territory by the Germans and the British in the nineteenth century show that colonial rule was the principal cause of PNG's political instability and weak economic activity, as they hindered the establishment of a strong national political and economic basis for self-governance and future stable development. The long-term impacts of European colonialism can even be seen as, via the determination of the modern political world-order, having worsened the effects of the global pandemic on the Global South, making their economic impact even more aggravating. The consequences of COVID-19 and the ways of managing the situation that were implemented can be further illuminated by analysing Papua New Guinea's response to the pandemic in both social and economic terms.

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The number of COVID-19 cases in Papua New Guinea is relatively low, compared to most other countries, in terms of statistics provided by them. This can be partly explained by the fact that the nation doesn't have a developed travel industry, and does not possess any vital international economic centres or international ties; thus there is not a lot of travel to this region. On February 16, 2021, according to official statistics, there had been 968 COVID-19 cases, with 846 recoveries and 122 deaths. The nation ranked 185<sup>th</sup> in cumulative total covid cases, which suggests that it was not severely affected by the pandemic (Statista.com). As mentioned, Papua New Guinea does not possess any globally vital economic activities (as do all those countries, including the US and a number of European countries, that have leading positions in these statistics), and it also has poor infrastructure, which limits the travel industry in lieu of further development. According to Lawrence (2017), 'PNG's budget position and relatively undeveloped markets for infrastructure services present major issues that affect funding of on-going infrastructure operations'; that is, the provision of water, electricity, and telecommunication resources, as well as transport (p. 85). This is connected to the fact that the economy of PNG lacks the efficiency of an advanced market economy, and is mostly focused on the agricultural sector, a problem whose roots lie in its colonial history. British control over the territory of Papua New Guinea did not contribute to its economic prosperity, as it restricted Papua's people from being able to make independent use of its resources and governing their economic activity by themselves. The unstable economy with its weak infrastructure also failed to attract foreign investments, making the country a less desirable tourist destination. This may help explain why its first covid case was confirmed only at the end of March 2020, while most countries that were at the centre of world economic activities reported their first cases in January-February 2020 (Lyons 2020).

At the same time, the country's poor infrastructure and dependence on rural areas have slowed its efforts to manage the consequences of the pandemic. The country has fewer cases, but also a poorer ability to manage them or prevent the spread of contagion. The majority of its population lives outside the urban areas and, considering the high poverty level in the country, 'most [of the poor majority] have only limited involvement in formal activities' (Gibson & Rozelle, DATE, p. 20). How does this affect the country's management of the pandemic? Since the economy is closely tied to the provision of healthcare, which is mostly focused in the cities, 'access to hospitals is extremely limited, with 80% of the population living outside urban centres' (Bright, 2020). While this situation has stabilized, at the

beginning of the global pandemic Papua New Guinea was ill-prepared because of a shortage of medical equipment and health care workers, along with the generally poor infrastructure in the country (Bright, 2020).

The most illustrative example can be seen through the analysis of the impact of the global pandemic on economic growth in PNG, as measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP). As the world moves towards a post-Covid situation, there will probably be an increased pressure for fast economic gain at the expense of people and nature and, due to the agricultural nature of the nation's economy (which became more agriculture-based during the period since the age of colonialism), Papua New Guinea will not benefit from this. 'The global economic disruption caused by covid-19 has harmed poorer people and poorer countries the most [...] pushing an estimated 100 million people into extreme poverty in 2020 and reversing more than two decades of progress' (BMG: 2). Papua New Guinea is not an exception, as the poverty level there has increased during the pandemic, with 'higher unemployment and poverty levels than previously anticipated in 2020' (World Bank, 9). Table 1 below helps to see the measure of economic damage from the pandemic.

**Table 1. Papua New Guinea: Key Economic Indicators, 2017–22**

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Percentage point differences from		
							January 2020 projections		
							2020	2021	2022
		Est.	Est.	Updated projections			Δ change		
Real GDP growth (percent), of which:	3.5	-0.8	6.0	-1.3	3.4	3.0	-4.2	0.5	0.0
Resource economy	4.4	-5.1	10.0	-2.7	4.8	3.1	-5.2	2.1	1.3
Non-resource economy	1.6	3.1	1.9	0.0	2.3	2.7	-3.1	-1.1	-1.7
GDP deflator (percent)	7.7	7.2	3.7	-2.0	8.4	4.6	-5.8	3.0	0.7
Current account balance (percent of GDP)	23.7	24.2	22.7	15.1	15.8	11.0	-11.0	-2.1	2.6
Gross official reserves (in months of imports)	4.0	5.1	5.1	3.4	3.4	3.9	-1.0	0.1	0.1
Fiscal balance (percent of GDP)	-2.5	-2.7	-4.9	-6.4	-3.8	-2.9	-0.6	0.2	-0.3
Public debt, net (percent of GDP)	35.9	37.7	39.2	47.0	46.5	47.5	5.0	2.5	3.8

Sources: Official data; World Bank staff estimates and projections.

According to World Bank statistics, Papua New Guinea's GDP of was expected to be higher for 2020 before the pandemic appeared; during the pandemic this number decreased by 4.2%, and then by 1.3%. From this we can conclude that even without Covid and its consequences, the decline in GDP was inevitable, being a result of an unstable economy (-0.8 in 2018, +6.0 in 2019), and the pandemic worsened the situation, furthering the decline. Nevertheless, based on these predictions, in 2021 there would still be growth in GDP, which would remain approximately the same for the following year, 2022. The real GDP growth having fallen from the level before the pandemic, in 2019, of 6.0%, it may take some time before the same level of growth is again achieved. The country's recovery is



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bound to be harder than for developed countries, due to the unstable political system, poor infrastructure, and lack of resources.

### Conclusion

There is clear evidence of the influence of European colonialism in the nineteenth century on the Global South, as dependency theory claims. The retarded economic development and poverty in the underdeveloped world that was caused by the colonial domination also was a cause of political instability and a low level of economic activity, as the political and economic foundations of strong development failed to be established, leaving a legacy of poor self-governance. Even though Papua New Guinea is among the countries with the lowest number of registered covid cases, the pandemic has still negatively affected its economic activity and its economic presence in the global arena, making it less likely, than it is for developed countries, that it will fully recover in the very near future.

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# 18

## SPUTNIK V COVID-19 VACCINE: A NEW FOREIGN POLICY TOOL FOR RUSSIA?

*Rauf Novruzov*

### **Abstract**

Given the devastating global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccines are becoming increasingly important in the world today. They are not only used to control the ongoing pandemic. For Russia, 'Sputnik V', the world's first officially registered vaccine, has been presented as a new tool to return the nation back to the world's centre stage, influencing governments abroad and bolstering its standing in various parts of the world. In the absence of access to Western countries' vaccines due to the focus of these countries on vaccinating their own population and slow vaccine rollout, more and more countries are opting for Russia's vaccine, which enables Russia to engage actively in 'vaccine diplomacy' worldwide to achieve its foreign policy objectives.

### **Introduction**

The world has encountered a novel and very unprecedented challenge – COVID-19, which has caused severe political, social, and economic consequences in almost every country. In the light of the ineffectiveness of repeated lockdowns, vaccines are perceived as the only way out of the pandemic, allowing countries to bring the virus's rapid transmission under control. However, COVID-19 vaccines are not just seen as providing protection from the deadly virus; they are also used as a tool by some countries for achieving geostrategic political purposes. Russia, which is one of the active players engaging in 'vaccine diplomacy', seeks to expand its global influence through the strategy of selling and/or donating the Sputnik V vaccine for use abroad. The vaccine is perceived as another tool to fulfil President Putin's long-standing desire to bring Russia back onto the world stage and restore it to great power status. Taking advantage of the vaccine vacuum, Russia has been sending millions of doses of Sputnik V vaccine to regions where Russia

has a limited presence or is competing for influence with the US. The vaccine is a crucial tool for Russia, giving it an advantage in its competition with the US for global power during the COVID-19 pandemic period. It promises Russia not only greater leverage in various parts of the world, but also an enhanced image in science.

In this article, I first explain why the Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine has been deemed a success story for Russia, including in this a discussion of which countries have signed up for Russia's vaccine in light of the shortage of supply of vaccines from the West. I then analyse how Russia is using the Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine for its political/geostrategic purposes in two regions on which Russia has been concentrating its efforts: Europe and Latin America.

### **Russia's foreign policy and realism in political science**

Realists argue that power is a vital factor in international relations that shapes relations between states. As Hans Morgenthau argued, 'international politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power' (cited in Węclawski, 2012). In this perspective, states as rational actors seek to increase their own power and influence in order to ensure their security in an anarchic international system. For self-interested states, the international environment becomes secure when they maximize their relative power over others; and to this aim, they employ self-help strategies, or, in other words, tools.

These realist elements are found in Russia's foreign policy. Since Putin came to power in 1999, Russian foreign policy has become more active, taking the approach of trying to increase its power. As a rising power, Russia has been seeking to disrupt the world order in which the US is an only superpower and secure a major global position for itself. With his speech at the 2007 Munich conference, Russia's President Putin made it clear that Russia does not accept a unipolar world and instead defends a multipolar international system (Kremlin.ru, 2007). For this reason, he believes that it is necessary for Russia to expand its influence across the world and thereby reclaim a great power role (Feinstein & Pirro, 2021). To this end, Russia is applying a set of tools of influence such as natural gas, human intelligence, and cyber operations. With the emergence of a novel challenge in the world, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Sputnik V vaccine was added to the list of tools of influence contributing to Russia's attempts to maximize its leverage

in the global arena. Russia views the pandemic as an opportunity to develop its presence in different corners of the world using its new tool.

I focus in this article primarily on Russia's vaccine diplomacy in Europe and Latin America, since these regions both occupy special places in Russia's foreign policy agenda. Russia has been attempting to increase its limited presence in Latin America since 2008, considering the region's growing role in international affairs, and seeing this as one arena for Russia to try to reposition itself as a world power and further its aim of building a multipolar world (Chaguaceda, 2019). When it comes to Europe, Russia has been pursuing a policy of divide and rule, utilizing multiple tools of influence, with the aim of weakening the EU and dealing with each member state separately.

### **The Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine: The Russian “success story”**

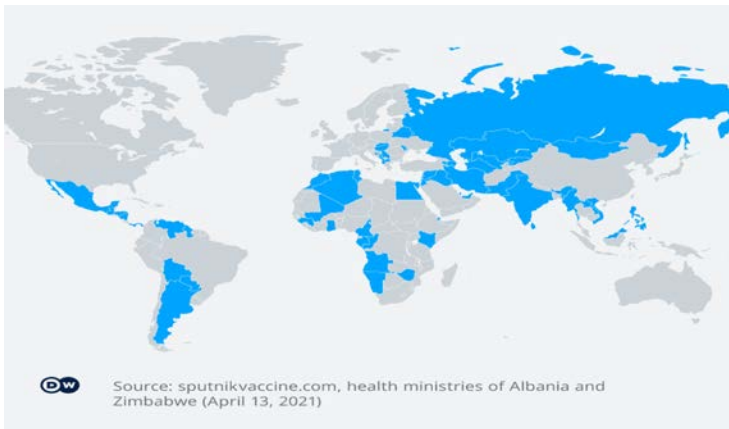
On August 11, 2020, the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, surprised the whole world with his announcement of the approval of the first vaccine against the COVID-19 – the domestically manufactured Sputnik V vaccine – for widespread use throughout the world. Even prior to the declaration of the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic by the World Health Organization in early March, Russia's Gamaleya National Centre of Epidemiology and Microbiology had already commenced developing a prototype of what would become the Sputnik V vaccine (Baraniuk, 2021). Initially, Putin's announcement was greeted with scepticism abroad, due to the absence of trials having been conducted on the safety and effectiveness of the vaccine. However, the early scepticism about the Sputnik V vaccine mainly vanished after the prestigious British medical journal *The Lancet* published a report stating that the Sputnik V vaccine has an efficacy of 91.6%. In one of the commentaries published in the journal, it was clearly stated that ‘another vaccine [Sputnik V] can now join the fight to reduce the incidence of COVID-19’ (Schiffling & Breen, 2021).

Touted as “the best vaccine in the world” by President Vladimir Putin, the Sputnik V vaccine highlights Russia's excellence and thereby helps to restore its image as a global scientific power, after years of relatively few scientific achievements in the wake of the USSR's dissolution in 1991 (News 18, 2021). The name of the vaccine carries a symbolic meaning, referring to Russia's most famous scientific

achievement during the Cold War period – the launching of the world's first space satellite in 1957, which was considered a historic setback for the West.

### **The countries that signed up for the Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine**

Russia's intention to use the vaccine for its geopolitical aims was clear from the outset, since Russia rushed to export millions of doses of its pioneering vaccine abroad prior to sufficiently vaccinating its own people. As of April 27, 2021, only about 12 million Russians, or 8.3 percent of the total population, had received at least the first dose of Sputnik V, whereas at that time 42.7 percent of the US population had received at least the first dose of vaccine, despite a slow rollout (Anderson, 2021). However, the US's retreat from multilateralism, or, more precisely, the absence of US leadership in the global initiative against COVID-19 and the lack of coordination with the EU in the fight against the novel pandemic during the presidency of Donald Trump, as well as its prioritization of the US population in vaccination, worked well to the advantage of Russia. To which should also be added the slow progress of the EU's vaccination efforts, due to a number of factors, including delays in delivery of the Astra Zeneca vaccine and declining supplies (Colson, 2021). Consequently, the shortage of vaccine supplies from the EU and US forced more and more countries struggling with a high number of COVID-19 cases to turn to the Sputnik V vaccine, which allowed Russia to step in and fill the void. So far, more than 60 countries worldwide, including several EU members, have approved a total of approximately 1.2 billion doses of the Russian vaccine for domestic use (Statista.com, 2021). Several countries, including India, Argentina, Serbia, and Italy (becoming the first EU country to manufacture the Russian Sputnik V vaccine without waiting for the approval of the European Medicines Agency) have been granted authority by Russia to produce Sputnik V in their own factories (Euronews, 2021).



*Countries where the Sputnik V vaccine has been approved for use.*

### **Sputnik V in Europe**

Russia is using its COVID-19 vaccine to inject itself into the EU, sowing divisions among EU member states, even within their governments, and thereby undermining the solidarity among member states in their approach towards Russia. The vaccine allows Russia to be involved in EU politics, increasing its role while amplifying divisions throughout the bloc. While Sputnik V is yet to be approved by European Medicine Agency (EMA), where it is still under evaluation, and European Commissioner for Internal Market Thierry Breton highlighted that the EU does not need the Russian vaccine, a number of member states have not hesitated to cut their own deals with Russia, moving away from the EU's common approach (Gotev, 2021). Encountering delays in Western vaccine supplies, Hungary and Slovakia had already purchased the Russian vaccine, bypassing the EMA's regulatory supervision. In the meantime, the Czech Republic, one of the countries worst-hit by COVID-19 (Koslerova, 2021), expressed interest in the Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine, with its Prime Minister Andrej Babis stating that the Czech Republic could use the Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine even though it had not been approved by the EU's drug agency, the European Medicines Agency (EMA) (Reuters, 2021). Even Germany and France, which have mostly defended the EU's common approach, had already begun conducting negotiations with Russia to buy the Sputnik V vaccine, while Austria concluded its talks with Russia to acquire 1



million doses of Sputnik V vaccine. As can be seen from these examples, Russia has already achieved its objective; like Russia's other political tool, natural gas, the Russian vaccine has essentially divided Europe. In the case of natural gas, Central and Eastern European states consider Russia an unreliable energy supplier, and hence, aim at reducing their dependence on Russian gas, an aim that quite a few other EU member states (Germany, France Italy, Netherlands, the Nordic countries) do not regard as important; thus, some have continued to conclude long-term bilateral supply contracts with Russian state-owned natural gas companies (Belkin, 2008). Similarly, while some member states, such as Lithuania and Poland consider the Russian vaccine a threat, and others prefer to await the approval of the EMA, several member states have already entered the deal, with Russia acting separately, neglecting the EU-wide approach. In this respect, it is interesting that the Prime Minister of Lithuania labelled the Russian vaccine 'another hybrid weapon to divide and rule' Europe (Henley, 2021).

The Russian vaccine has not only triggered splits among member states; it has also caused divisions within these states and their governments. For instance, the Slovakian government collapsed after its Prime Minister Igor Matovič secretly struck a deal with Russia to purchase 2 million doses of Sputnik V vaccine despite the opposition of his coalition allies in the pro-Western government, which caused a political crisis. He stepped down, ostensibly to pull the country out of the crisis (Holroyd, 2021). In Italy, significant disagreements between different regions emerged over the Sputnik V vaccine. Italy's Umbria, Lazio, and Sardinia regions stated their willingness to use the Russian vaccine, and the Campania region went as far as to cut its own deal with Russia to buy the Sputnik V vaccine, while the president of the Emilia-Romagna region criticized these regions, emphasizing that 'no Italian region can buy vaccines on its own, as the rules stand today' (Damiani, Lettig, & Michalopoulos, 2021; Reuters, 2021). In the Czech Republic, following the president's statement of interest in the Sputnik V vaccine, the prime minister sacked the health and foreign ministers due to their opposition to buying the Russian vaccine without its registration with EMA (Rohac, 2021).

By causing deepening disagreements and divisions throughout the bloc, Russia pursued the objective of preventing the EU from speaking with one voice, making it weak in the face of Russia, and effectively unable to take a single position that might seem too harsh vis-à-vis Russia. This is particularly important for Russia, at a time when the EU wants to punish Russia over issues that include the

poisoning of opposition leader Alexey Navalny and the military build-up in the eastern part of Ukraine. It could be argued that the EU's dependence on Russian vaccine supplies and divisions among member states over them, which have generally affected their positions on Russia broadly, is one of the reasons why the EU has not yet been able to come up with a tough and unified stance on Russia on the above-mentioned issues. For instance, with regard to the attack on Navalny, the EU has been satisfied with sanctioning only a handful of Russian officials. As for the military troop build-up in eastern Ukraine, which was the highest ever with more than 100,000 soldiers, the EU did not even feel the need to impose economic sanctions on Russia despite the calls from the Foreign Minister of Ukraine to do so (Reuters, 2021).

It can be claimed that these short-term purposes are aimed at achieving Putin's long-term objective of world-power status for Russia. In order to reach this goal, it is important to have a divided and consequently, weak Europe, which would be unable to think and act strategically towards Russia. In this context, the Sputnik V vaccine is a new foreign policy tool that allows Russia to influence European politics, its decision-making process amplifying divisions and disagreements in the union.

### **Sputnik V in Latin America**

The Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine can be seen as a means that, alongside military arms and equipment sales, counterdrug agreements, and trade generally, are being used by President Putin to expand Russia's presence in the region, which has traditionally been considered as within the US's sphere of influence. In recent years, trade and immigration issues with the US, the rise of populist candidates, and currently an absence of the US's vaccines in Latin America, have created favourable conditions for Russia to gain a greater foothold in the region, which is part of Putin's strategy to expand Russia's global reach (Gurganus, 2018).

Latin American states are on the list of worst-affected states by the COVID-19 pandemic, accounting for about 24% of all confirmed cases worldwide despite representing only 8.5% of the world population (Palasoe, 2021). Having faced their failure to obtain Western vaccines, more and more countries in Latin America are placing orders for the Russian vaccine, which allows Russia to affirm its role in the region using the health crisis to its own advantage. This situation offers

Russia an opportunity to restart its diplomacy, build deeper partnerships with Latin American states, and thereby improve its engagement in the US's backyard, which was mainly restricted to socialist and Communist regimes — Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua — prior to the pandemic. The vaccine has significantly boosted Russia's image in the region, where the planes carrying Russian vaccine are welcomed by state officials and Russia is praised on major TV channels. For instance, Bolivia immediately turned to Russia with a purchase of up to 5.2 million doses of Sputnik vaccine (Bolivian President Luis Arce personally greeted the delivery of the first doses) after struggling to sign an agreement with the Western drug firms, who told the Bolivian government that developing countries including Bolivia 'had to wait until June', as the Bolivian trade minister noted (Lawler, 2021). Soon after the vaccine deal, the Russian president discussed with his Bolivian counterpart various topics ranging from building a nuclear power plant to lithium mining and gas reserves (Smith, 2021). Another Latin American state, Argentina, has gratefully received approximately 4.8 million doses of the Sputnik V vaccine so far and will be the first state in Latin America to produce Russia's vaccine (France 24, 2021). Ramsar (2021) argues that Argentina even 'served as an embassy of sorts for Sputnik V; reportedly, Argentinian delegations to Moscow in late 2020 translated reams of details into Spanish and shared these with Bolivia, Peru, Mexico, Uruguay, and Chile to speed up their ability to decide.' In Mexico, Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard Casaubón, standing alongside the Russian Ambassador to Mexico, Viktor Koronelli, accepted the arrival of the first batch of Sputnik V vaccines in late February 2021 at the Mexico City International Airport, expressing his gratitude to Putin (VOA News, 2021). In total, at least nine states in the Latin American region have approved the Russian vaccine, and this growing acceptance of the Sputnik V vaccine suggests that Russia is enhancing its standing in the region while the US is losing influence.

## Conclusion

In a world where an unprecedented challenge, COVID-19, has impacted nearly every country, taking the lives of millions of people, and causing a deep economic recession, several countries are exploiting the situation to achieve foreign policy objectives. Russia is keenly filling the vaccine vacuum that was created by vaccine nationalism and the slow vaccine rollout in the West, engaging in 'vaccine diplomacy' in Europe and Latin America with the aim of boosting its global standing. In the long-term, Russia's President Vladimir Putin aims to

return his nation to great power status, building a web of relationships and enhancing its influence in Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and other parts of the world, using the vaccine as another tool. In Latin America, which is traditionally considered the US's backyard, more than nine states have already authorized Russia's homemade Sputnik V vaccine for domestic use, allowing Russia to expand its presence in the region by improving its bilateral relations with the state in question and gaining strategic influence. In Europe, Russia's vaccine has triggered divisions between -and within- the various national governments that undermining Europe's ability to speak with one voice, and thereby weakened the EU, which is useful for Russia's project of achieving world-power status.

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# 19

## COVID-19: FUEL FOR A 'GREAT RESET'?

*Rareş Hărăsan*

### **Abstract**

The disruptive nature of the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the long-standing socio-economic disparities of the current neo-liberal capitalist system. The World Bank's prediction of the deepest recession since the Second World War represents a chance to push for a more equitable capitalism via a 'Great Reset'. This article aims to substantiate the need for a 'Great Reset' and the reasons why the current system, despite its flaws, has remained unchanged. In the first section, I argue that capitalism's victory over Communism after the Cold War and the resulting Liberal IR theory has given it an unshakeable synonymity to 'progress'. In the second section I show that the façade of capitalism and the products of its "candy-store" are maintained by working people who live paycheck-to-paycheck and stand to lose the most during this crisis. This is exacerbated by the fact that the constant need to work prevents them from developing 'class consciousness'. In the third section, I make use of present-time statistics to argue that one's ability to isolate during the Covid crisis is closely tied to the availability of social and health services, the state of their lived-in area, income, job sector, and housing situation. These findings suggest that capitalism loses its 'appearance' when those who maintain it risk losing their livelihood due to a crisis. A 'Great Reset' would kickstart the efforts towards addressing inequality, which in turn would allow working people to advocate for their interests.

### **Introduction: Forecasting Capitalism during and after COVID-19**

In an earlier essay, in *Inside Westminster* magazine, I discussed 'Romania, Covid-19 and the post-Westminster "Good Life"'. In that essay I touched upon the effects of the pandemic on the world and compared my personal journey to Aristotle's ideal of the 'good life'. Referring to the work of Scambler (2020), who suggests that the Covid-19 pandemic may be 'a breaching experiment' (p. 140) that exposes a



'fractured society' (pp. 141). This article aims to continue that discussion by arguing that the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the socio-economic disparities of the current neo-liberal capitalist system and pierced through its 'messianic appearance' inherited from its victory in the Cold War. Through this argument, I will put forth the hypothesis that the promotion of capitalism as the premier economic force after from the war and the praise received from the IR theory of the time constructed a 'candy-store' whose goods promised social status and a sense of self-empowerment. The working classes' engagement in this system with a wage or salary gained from its perpetual need to work distracts it from acknowledging its subordinate role within it. Crises such as this pandemic reveal the shortcomings of the paycheck-to-paycheck condition, along with the reality that access to the goods of 'the candy-store' is to some extent unequal, both of which facts may contribute to a rediscovery of the subordinate class's 'consciousness'. Scambler's (2020) example of increasing wealth inequality is only one of the numerous disparities that have accelerated during the Covid-19 pandemic. This has taken place on a background that reveals the deepest recession predicted by the World Bank (2020) since the Second World War, with a shrinking of the global economy by 5.2%. The collective hardships brought by this health crisis will likely translate into a unanimous call for change. Moreover, this period of worldwide uncertainty has also brought into question the efficacy of the current iteration of capitalism during the pandemic. For example, Schwab (2020), in an article written in June 2020, a period marked by relaxed lockdowns, takes into account the imminence of an economic depression, a spike in unemployment, and increased global debt and economic inequality that favour billionaires, to call for a 'Great Reset'. As Schwab (2020) characterises it, the 'Great Reset' is an umbrella term for changes indicated in various proposals meant to mitigate the vulnerabilities laid bare by Covid-19. The first of these that Schwab discusses involves authors advising governments to create the conditions for a 'stakeholder economy' and implement reforms that promote fairer outcomes. The second possibility he discusses involves the use of government investment that, under a 'Great Reset', would include progress towards shared goals such as equality and sustainability. A third possibility is to extend the global cooperative effort to develop the means to detect and possibly treat the virus, and apply them also towards addressing other health and social challenges. Henderson (2020), writing in July, discusses the resulting inequality from massive layoffs and the hardship of living from paycheck-to-paycheck. Unlike Schwab, he emphasizes the role of the free market and invokes the moral duty of firms to uphold the health of institutions, rather than a 'Great Reset'

triggered by governments alone. Lastly, Tappe's (2020), who agrees with Schwab in designating wealth inequality and marginalization as key traits of capitalist society, Tappe, in a discussion of global debt, claims that despite capitalism's supposed efficiency, it accomplishes the opposite, losing its essential workforce that, without support through welfare, risks 'falling through the cracks' of the system. The three authors each have their own distinct understanding of the present situation, yet they highlight common themes regarding the flaws of the current system, such that the question becomes whether it is worth trying to patch a flawed system or would make more sense to look for something new.

In the first section below, I unearth the expectations that were placed on capitalism as it emerged victorious from the Cold War, in order to reveal the dissonance between its 'appearance' and how it is maintained. Having established these expectations (through a mix of historical examples and IR theory), in the second section I will focus on the working people who inhabit this system, using Marxist theory to argue that the means through which capitalism is kept in good repair have changed the relationships that workers have their labour and themselves, and this has aroused greater 'consciousness' of their real collective goals, previously obscured by the permanent necessity to maintain employment. In the third section, using the UK and the US as case studies, I argue that the pandemic so widened the irregularities of the current system enough that it enables its 'flawless façade' to be called into question. In the conclusion, putting all this together, I argue that a capitalism with these fault lines exposed is currently failing the populations it is supposed to serve.

### **Part 1: Capitalism, a hot new flavour for 'the perfect age to come'.**

Buzan and Little (1999) argued that the end of the Cold War shifted scholarly activity in and around International Relations. The authors call the Realist view of the international system the 'Westphalian system', in reference to the 1648 Peace of Westphalia treaties that marked the transition of the European state 'from its medieval to its modern form' (p. 2); its main unit is the sovereign state within a distinctive international framework. The Realist school of thought, as described by Buzan and Little, assumes that the Westphalian model is applicable to all of world politics since the rise of civilization. Buzan and Little (1999) note that Realists see sovereign states as the units of this international system, with their priorities being military rivalry and the politics of war, competition, and maintenance

of the balance of power, over other objectives. Buzan and Little explain that the liberal view of the international system, while it engaged with the Realist view, insisted on the capacity of states in the Westphalian model for systemic transformation. Before the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, capitalism was a key concept in both of the mainstream schools of IR thought outside of Marxism on its margin, realism (or neorealism) and liberalism. However, after 1989, capitalism was promoted by the liberal school of thought that had framed the Cold War as an ideological battle between capitalism and Communism. Only then did liberal International Relations scholars start paying more attention to the transformative consequences of the global expansion of liberal capitalism. The renewed implementation of capitalism gave the liberal side two new theories on which their worldview could be said to rely: those of 'democratic peace' and 'globalisation' (p. 91). Buzan and Little claim that these two theories challenge key assumptions of Realist IR theory. The theory of 'democratic peace' challenges the assumption that sovereign states in the Westphalian model prioritise the fight for power, instead of there being a mutual understanding between liberal democracies that the spread of democracy is a more promising and even lucrative goal. Moreover, liberal democracies favour cooperation through economic interdependence and tackling security issues as a community. Buzan and Little claim that interdependence is accomplished through capitalism. This claim leads to the expectation that capitalism will serve as a universal global force for progress. Globalisation theory elaborates on this by asserting that since the Cold War, liberalism has gone unchallenged, and as such, has established itself as the ideal world-building ideology. Liberalism and capitalism are mutually implicating, as the pursuit of economic efficiency not only offers the best chances of improving human welfare but is also connected to the development of individual rights, democracy, and peace. Lastly, globalisation theory is supported by the observation, cited by the authors, that, since 1750, the world's population has grown from 770 million to 6 billion, while the global Gross National Product has increased from '148 billion USD in 1750 to 6,080 billion USD in 1990'. World trade has shown tremendous increases as well, growing 'from 700 million USD to 8,364,321 million USD between 1750 and 1994' (p. 92). All of these statistics suggest that during the last 250 years (as of 1999), world trade has outperformed the growth in the human population by over 1,400 times and outperformed global GNP by 281 times, which further adds to the expectation of capitalism that it deter military engagements in the international system through the promise of great progress and wealth resulting from economic engagement. The status of liberal capitalism

as the victorious ideology after the Cold War, the response from liberal IR, and various statistics, have broadly been used to support the claim that capitalism and all that it entails are synonymous with global progress. The image of capitalism as a 'candy-store' described above yields in this view to that of a system that is unequal and unsustainable, especially for working people, and a fortiori under the pressure of a global health emergency.

Comaroff and Comaroff's (2001) work reframes expectations about capitalism from an international relations perspective into a societal one. The authors note the discrepancy between the unifying explanations of liberal IR concerning capitalism as discussed by Buzan and Little (1999), with the synergistic spiralling of wealth and poverty, and the possible rise of a 'new feudalism' (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001, p.1). The authors also noticed a correspondence between discussions of the politics of consumerism, human rights, entitlement, and new patterns of exclusion that expand upon the long-standing social categories of gender, sexuality, race, and class. The authors pin the resulting discord within society to the image of capitalism as a 'messianic' ideology at the beginning of the millennium. In a reiteration of the link to the political climate at the end of the Cold War, the triumph of capitalism over socialism made it appear as the only valid social horizon, granting it a sacralised sense of finality that makes one think of the next millennium as the 'perfect age to come' (p. 63).

In thinking of capitalism from this second viewpoint, I now turn to the most common by-product of capitalism responsible for shaping society – consumerism. At the end of the twenty-first century, Comaroff and Comaroff argue that it is seen as providing the standard measurement of modernity's health. Expanding upon this line of thought, one could come to the conclusion that a society is well-developed (i.e., modern) if it incorporates consumerism in its processes. This also leads to the realisation that a person's status and character is decided by inanimate objects. As consumption became the motivating spirit of the late twentieth century, the limelight was placed solely upon the act of consumption without taking into consideration availability or the production of those things which were to be consumed. Thus, capitalism could be imaged as a 'candy-store' with never-ending stocks of pleasure. Moreover, if the triumph of capitalism is inevitable and irrevocable, its seemingly flawless façade makes participation in the 'candy-store' a seemingly inescapable and even obligatory part of life.

## 2. The unspoken upkeep of the 'candy-store'.

An eclipse of production has been triggered by a change in the nature of capitalism. The workplace and the activity of labour are no longer the main sites of value and identity. Since in a consumer society inanimate objects are a means to empowerment, the use of 'value' and 'identity' in this context represent 'material development' and 'personal development', respectively. Therefore, moving the workplace and its labour elsewhere has justified the adoption of methods that make labour cheaper, less taxed, and less protected by states and unions, not excluding the replacement of the human element with 'nonstandard' (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001, p. 4) means of manufacture. This 'out of sight, out of mind' approach to labour has turned it from an activity with the potential to develop the worker into a relatively transient, gainless, and menial occupation. The distinction between 'material development' and 'personal development' can be expanded by considering the 'capital-labour' and 'labour-labourer' relationships. The former is explained in Marxism as a contractual bond between the worker and his or her superior in which the worker's labour power is 'sold' to the superior in order to produce commodities that are in turn exchanged at a certain rate for money. The bond is expressed as a contract because the labour power belongs to the worker, though his work is performed on the terms of the employer. The terms of labour are set so that the labour power creates more value than the act itself, and this builds up the capital which is dependent on a covert form of 'class domination' (Harvey, 2014, p. 43). It is covert because technically, the worker is free to take his or her labour power anywhere, yet reliance on the exchange rate of labour (which is skewed in favour of capital) will compel the worker to return to work, thus having to replicate the conditions of his own domination in order to live. Marx (2007) argues that in order to gain greater spiritual freedom, a person must be able to break their bondage to their bodily needs, meaning that, above all, they must have time at their disposal for spiritual creative activity and spiritual enjoyment. However, as the 'capital-labour' relationship establishes, the worker through the exchange rate applied to his labour-power has to work continually in order to live. Marx adds that the worker becomes all poorer the more wealth he produces, and so does the amplitude of the production process. Despite the 'technical freedom' of being able to eat, drink, and procreate, labour always has to be sold, because unlike the resulting commodities, it cannot be accumulated and labour that is not put to use is of no value. Labour is life and requires maintenance through food; otherwise it suffers and dies. The worker

who understand his own life as a commodity is thereby also subject to a waged slavery. The worker puts his life force into the result of his labour, and because of his reliance on work, his life will belong to that object. Moreover, the more life he puts into objects, the less himself he becomes, as the result of labour gains its own existence outside of the worker, ultimately leading to the objectification of the workers, who lose themselves in their activity, denying their humanity.

These considerations of the 'capital-labour' and 'labour-labourer' relationships together make it clear that maintaining capitalism comes with a steep price for the many, though it benefits the few. The above points raised by Marx's work are useful in understanding the impact of the 'paycheck-to-paycheck' lifestyle on people's capacity to develop as individuals. The work of György Lukács (1971) brings the aforementioned 'capital-labour' and 'labour-labourer' relationships under one roof through the term 'class consciousness' (p. 52). Lukács argues that arriving at 'class consciousness' requires understanding what makes a certain society tick in terms of its history, structural relationships, and especially class relationships. He stresses the importance of class relationships over the interactions between individuals, because knowledge of the former also offers insights into the economy of the whole society. 'Class consciousness' is defined through its antithesis to 'false consciousness' (p. 50), which involves a class-conditioned lack of awareness towards one's own socio-historical and economic condition packaged as a defined feature that governs all aspects of life within the society. Therefore, to Lukács, 'class consciousness' is a class's successful attempt at pinpointing its interests and reaching the logical conclusions as to the actions needed to achieve these interests. Through contrast, the failure of such attempts entails the upkeep of the illusions of ideology. Moreover, Lukács states that the maintenance of this illusion by the subordinate class benefits the ruling class, as its power is reinforced by the justification of the existing state of affairs. If we combine Lukács's theory of what is needed for class consciousness and Marx's notion of how this is inhibited by workers' need for constant work in order to live, which also reinforces their subordinate role, as Lukács noted, we can see how it would become difficult to speak truth to power. It is crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic that weaken the arguments in favour of the status-quo. The possibility of losing the lifestyle- (or life-) enabling paycheck, the facilities it affords and the image of walking into a store and not having access to the supplies needed to isolate oneself from the illness all enable one to see that the 'candy-store' of capitalism is fallible. Ultimately, this

newfound awareness of one's own socio-economic conditions can facilitate development of 'class consciousness'.

### **Part 3: Socio-economic conditions are survival conditions**

Marmot and Allen (2020) agree that during a health crisis, the aforementioned socio-economic conditions determine one's ability to protect their health. In the case of the United Kingdom, the authors found that there is a clear correlation between the economic underdevelopment of an area and mortality from the virus. Thus, the pandemic was worsened by existing health inequalities. The authors trace these inequalities back to 2010, when they noticed three worrying trends: a slowdown in the increase of life expectancy, a continuing increase in the discrepancy between life expectancies in more and less deprived areas, and an increase in regional differences as well as a decline in life expectancy in women in the most disadvantaged areas outside London. Considering the reduction in spending on social welfare by '3% in the least deprived 20% of local authorities' (p. 681) and '16% in the most deprived' (p. 682), respectively, it is clear that the UK met the pandemic in a weak position in terms of its social and health services. According to data from a Food Foundation survey, 5.1 million adults in families with children had experienced food insecurity since the start of the lockdown, as of the time of their writing. Further findings suggest that the 'work from home' guideline is also subject to economic circumstances such that the lower a person's income, the less likely they are to be in jobs that enable working from home. Before the lockdown, 'only 10% of workers in accommodation and food, followed by 53% of workers in communication and information, could work from home' (p. 682). Additionally, 'front-line' workers such as social workers, drivers, chefs, sales, and retail assistants have faced a high Covid-19 mortality.

Besides the food and job sectors, housing is another determinant of vulnerability to the virus. In the United States, more than 433,700 cases of Covid-19 and 10,700 additional deaths between March and September were caused by expiring state eviction bans. At one point during the pandemic, it was estimated that "as many as 40 million people would be displaced as a result of evictions" (Nova, 2020). To counteract this, Nova reports that 43 states including Washington, DC temporarily barred evictions. Many of these bans lasted just 10 weeks, while other states maintained them. The reasoning behind the increase in Covid-19 cases subsequent to evictions is in part that people often move in with friends and family,

therefore increasing their number of contacts. In the case of homeless people, entry in a homeless shelter has the same effect, because they are indoor places that can become crowded. Cline-Cole (2020) reached the conclusion that although the virus by itself does not discriminate, political economy does, by reinforcing existing and sometimes creating new patterns of coronavirus-related inequality. Although Covid-19 has highlighted the limits of the neoliberal globalization that has reigned supreme since the 1980s and the populist nationalisms that have developed across the world since the 2000s, it has also started a pattern of transnational solidarity and anti-capitalist sentiment that could arguably be attributed to the vulnerable classes' new-found awareness of their own conditions. Cline-Cole also found that, despite the variety of pandemic responses from states around the world, they showed reservations when it came to switching their priorities away from neoliberal economic growth. There is a contrast in discussions around government activities for the protection of public health, which can be seen in comparing a working class's point of view with that of the privileged classes. According to Letzing (2020), the wealthy have been better insulated from the pandemic than others. This allowed them, among other things, to focus on making the most out of the stock market declines. As assets like stocks got much cheaper, they were able to accumulate significantly more of them before they regained value. Neate (2020) discusses the moral viability of extreme wealth concentration and billionaire wealth being impossible to spend across multiple lifetimes of absolute luxury in order to argue that the wealthy and insulated should increase their contributions to the systems that the vulnerable rely on.

## **Conclusion: The Future of political research on Covid-19**

This article started with a discussion of some recent literature documenting the way Covid-19 is likely to shape the world's future. The pandemic has given the world the opportunity to re-imagine itself into a more equitable environment for everyone. I first explored how capitalism (and liberal IR thought) leveraged its strengthened appearance after the Cold War to become the predominant economic system across the world. I then discussed, with reference to Marxist theory, the two principal social classes in capitalism, and their different priorities within capitalist society. Finally, I considered the widening social and economic disparities during the pandemic of the UK and US. The shock caused by the unavailability of supplies at the beginning of the pandemic and the inability of most people to live without working due to their dependence on wages has demystified the



'candy-store' image of capitalism. This in principle allows the working class, those whose work goes towards maintaining the 'candy-store' in good repair, to collectively advocate for better living prospects thanks to a newly-found awareness of their socio-economic conditions. Future research seeking to explore the current world order's ability – or inability – to shelter the global vulnerable class would benefit from looking into the ongoing vaccine development efforts and the logic behind their distribution around the world. These same endeavours could better integrate work like Cline-Cole's with the purpose of formulating a cross-continental account of the pandemic's challenges to the global political economy.

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# 20

## BUSINESS AS USUAL, GREEN GRO22: CAN THE CAPABILITIES APPROACH REASSESS THE ORTHODOX APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

*Polina Encheva*

### **Abstract**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the well-being of people globally has not been more central to discussions of both development economics and political philosophy. In this paper, I look at the capabilities approach to development, whose greatest strength is that it seeks to balance materialistic and nonmaterialistic factors in evaluating human welfare, and thus calls for collaboration across disciplines. Using Martha Nussbaum's 'capabilitarian' thinking, I construct a new framework concentrated on human flourishing. I test the plausibility of moral reasoning in the framework by exploring whether and how it can improve the well-being of individuals in conflict zones. In doing so, I pay particular attention to the debate on foreign aid programmes and the deterioration of emergency actions of the UN-RWA in Palestine and the Middle East region since 2019. I look closely at new ways of reconstructing the structural thinking behind multilateral institutions, and the conceptualisation of foreign aid itself. This rethinking calls for reconsideration of legal solutions reached on a global level in the post-pandemic world.

### **Introduction**

Following some more radical claims in heterodox economics, the 'capabilities approach' acknowledges 'that the human being is an unfathomable mystery' and is 'not to be completely set forth in tabular form' (Nussbaum & Sen, 2009, p. 2). This entails a stress on the importance of individual freedoms, drawing on

an exaggerated picture of the differences between the basic idea of the capabilities approach and certain versions of utilitarianism (Qizilbash, 2008). I will attempt to reaffirm this contrast in assessing the plausibility of the reformulated approach. I look particularly at the 'aid effectiveness debate' in the case of the UNRWA cuts in funding since 2019 and continuing until the COVID-19 pandemic. My main purpose in doing this will be to present the capabilities approach comprehensively and illustrate its impact on improving the quality of life of the most vulnerable individuals. It is important to highlight the dreadful conditions that displaced people and those in conflict zones endure during the pandemic. The ongoing pandemic is yet another obstacle that the global community faces in improving peoples' quality of life. In the first section I will explore the fluidity of the boundaries between economic and moral theory when the capabilities approach is regarded as both. My main aim is to re-examine the thinking behind various approaches to development in the period in question, and draw out some useful conceptual and theoretical lessons. For the sake of accuracy and comprehensiveness, I will test those lessons in relation to the debate on foreign aid and the political arrangements. The actions of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) on behalf of Palestine refugees in the Near East from 2019 will be analyzed.

## **1. The Capability Approach as Economic and Moral Theory**

"Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and development itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing."

- John S. Mill, 'On Individuality, as One of the Elements of Wellbeing' (1859: III)

The question of equal distribution of goods on both an international and state level has been the subject of an ongoing debate in political economy for some time. Using the notion of human capabilities and people's real-life opportunities as a new measure of comparison and (re-) distribution of utilities, the economist Amartya Sen developed an economic and political programme to improve quality of life and ensure justice based on individuals' capabilities. Despite major theoretical disputes about the capability approach, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) put forth its eight Millennium Development

Goals on the basis of Sen's main principles of the human development approach (United Nations, 2016, p. 4).

This section will present the theoretical debate and the conceptual development of the capabilities approach, as both economic and moral theory, by looking at the work of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. I will argue that the capabilities approach operates on two different, and separate, levels, as a theory of the achievement of economic freedom on the one hand, and of achieving political and personal freedom on the other. The inherently utilitarian character of the approach (as means of achieving freedom) has not been adequately considered by Sen or Nussbaum. I will argue in defense of the utilitarian character of the capabilities approach, with reference to scholarship on it in the last 40 years, and John Stuart Mill's work 'On Liberty' (1869), as well as Sen's famous Tanner Lecture on Human Values, 'Equality of What?' (1979), mapping out his heterodox approach to economics and the original framework of the capabilities approach for which he received the Nobel Prize in 1998. Departing from Sen's economics and continue by pointing out some of the problems with Nussbaum's universalist capabilities thinking in the context of modern liberalism, with an analysis of her own Tanner Lecture on Human Values from 2002, 'Beyond the Social Contract: Towards Global Justice'.

### 1.1 Amartya Sen

In his Tanner Lecture 'Equality of What?' (1979), Amartya Sen poses two questions for consideration to egalitarians in particular: What metrics should be used to establish the extent to which the egalitarian goal of equality is realised within given boundaries (such as those of a nation)? and which aspects of a person's state of being and individual conditions should be considered fundamental, and thus to be included as part of the metrics for measuring the quality of life? In his effort to answer those questions, Sen has provided the framework for the capabilities approach, which rests on two normative claims (Sen, 1979): (1) that each individual should be treated as an end. Thus, their personal freedom to achieve their own well-being is of primary moral importance; (2) As this personal freedom goes beyond mere economic freedom, the metric should reflect people's ability to be and to do ('beings', 'doings', and also 'functionings') and their real opportunities.

The capabilities approach differs from other theories in its use of the criteria of personal utility (happiness) and relative wealth (real income). However, despite its claims to be radically different, this approach finds common grounds with traditional theories like deontology and utilitarianism (Robeyns, 2003, 2016; Nussbaum, 2011). The capabilities approach takes the same measure of means of freedom as in Rawls's theory of justice and uses similar comparisons of resource holdings as a basis for just equality to Dworkin's criterion of 'equality of resources' (Cohen, 2009, p. 16). According to Cohen (2009), who has presented an egalitarian alternative to Sen's model, both of those analogies fail to provide a solid theoretical base for Sen's idea, and instead have exactly the opposite effect, making it seem weak and ambiguous. A few years later, Sen seized on these Aristotelian provenance of his ideas of 'capabilities' and 'functionings', aiming perhaps to push the capabilities approach further away from traditional consequentialism and orthodoxy. His collaborative work with Martha Nussbaum towards the development of capabilities theory on a non-utilitarian basis portrays it as a less ambiguous idea. His call for attention to something like opportunity ('capability') (Sen, 1985) was first presented as 'a partial guide to the part of moral goodness that is associated with the idea of equality' (Sen, 1979, p. 220). Sen has claimed that '[i]f an underlying idea has an essential ambiguity, a precise formulation of that idea must try to capture that ambiguity rather than hide or eliminate it'. (Sen, 2009, pp. 33-34). Sen's perspective is broadly in line with developments in intellectual history in the latter part of the last century. It also has obvious similarities with Mill's idea about the realization of 'abilities and capacities in humans' (Mill, 1863, p. 6). In his attempt to describe Mill's distinction between economic and moral abilities, Sen has makes use of a different meaning of the concept of 'capability' (Cohen, 2009, p. 10).

With the benefit of these comparisons, and acknowledging the ambiguity of Amartya Sen's framework for using people's reasoning and capabilities to achieve freedom, I will consider the utility of this approach in developing a partial theory of justice.

## **1.2 Martha C. Nussbaum**

The scope of the capabilities approach cannot be fully grasped without looking at Martha Nussbaum's two essays appraising Amartya Sen's approach. Unlike Sen, Nussbaum her capabilityarianism from his original formulation.

In her Tanner Lecture, Martha C. Nussbaum makes precise her own version of capabilities theory. In 'Frontier of Justice' (2007), she discusses the usefulness of the social-contract tradition for the capabilities, and defends its role within orthodoxy. One aspect of what she presents as the framing of the capabilities approach is a theory of justice. Relying on Rawls's 'Theory of Justice' (1971), she rejects any connection with comprehensive consequentialism in reframing Sen's approach. Nussbaum agrees with two major objections of Rawls's to utilitarianism. One is to the aggregative character of utilitarianism, to the effect that it is insensitive to equality of distribution. Secondly, Rawls introduces a theory of primary goods that unlike utilitarianism, can command normative attention (Cohen, 2009, pp. 10-11). Like Sen, she rejects both welfare measures, which like Rawls she considers too subjective, and the Rawlsian measures which welfarists found too objective.

The disagreement between the capabilities approaches of Sen and Nussbaum goes beyond the debate about justice. Nussbaum thinks it important to find ways people can fully express their human powers, and be provided with spaces with real opportunities (capabilities). Particular attention should be paid to her conceptualisation of functions, because this is where her theory further parts from Sen's. While embracing his distinction between human capabilities and human functionings, she has preferred to focus on 'true human flourishing' (Nussbaum, 1988). In this way she claims to have a richer thinking of capabilities than both orthodoxy and most theories that lie within the tradition of modern liberalism. She introduces the Aristotelian notion of character into the capabilities approach, along with his notion of 'potentiality as 'capability of existing or acting' (Liddell & Scott, 1977, p. 452).

Nussbaum's theory of the gradual development of capabilities runs the risk of seeking to attain the uppermost threshold of one's capabilities rather than raising the lowest one. According to Cohen (2009), Nussbaum's idea of 'equality of access to advantage does not even imply that there actually is such a thing as genuine choice' (p. 28). Thus, claims Cohen, she exaggerates the idea of 'human flourishing' as a goal, the same way Sen exaggerates the idea of freedom with its egalitarian concern.



## **2. Adapting the Discourse on Foreign Aid**

The universalism of both Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's formulations of the capabilities approach has left them unable to distinguish policy arrangements in their own terms, thus misinterpreting the role of international and national institutions in the decision-making processes on conditional aid. The current structural thinking behind the capabilities approach to promote inclusiveness in policymaking is incomplete. Neither Sen's economic heterodoxy nor Nussbaum's feminist orthodox view of the approach have been sufficient to make an impact on the debate of foreign aid. I will now attempt to bring the theoretical discussions from chapter one and two into practical contexts and argue for a revised orthodox version of the approach. In this reconstructed capabilities approach, I will try to define foreign aid in new terms, rather than supporting all the grand aid plans to save the world being hatched across Washington, London, and Paris. Putting to use the capabilities approach that way, it will become evident that similar discussions can be conducted in the context of the debates not only on foreign aid but also those on climate change or even humanitarian intervention. Thus, this analysis is aimed as a critique of the 'planners of markets', and the self-declared champions of democracy and the 'liberal peace'.

The 'aid effectiveness debate' has a particular relevance to the considerations above, for two reasons. First, the debate emerged in the 1990s as a result of inquiry into the role of aid in economic development and 'the extent to which many of the aid projects undertaken by multilateral and bilateral donors have been based on the theoretical findings of this debate' (Taghdisi-Rad, 2011, p. 19). Secondly, the capabilities approach originally emerged as a 'tool for aid in participatory evaluation...to understand how development work... [outside] narrow limits prescribed by donor and development implementing agencies, which promote the interests of neo-imperial global systems of power' (Porter & de Wet, 2009, p. 288).

Before looking further at critical and neo-classical approaches to foreign aid, it is worth looking at the relationship between the moral principles of the capabilities approach and some of the major international aid-oriented international organisations in greater detail. Rather than focus on institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), I will look at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), to discuss the morality of non-traditional approaches in development economics, which focus on ends and not only

means. Particular attention will be given to USAID's problematic relationship with the UNRWA, particularly since 2018 (Reinl, 2019).

In her book *Foreign Aid: Diplomacy, Development, Domestic Politics*, Carol Lancaster (2007) set the scene in the debate of foreign aid by asking, 'Why aid is given?'. She discusses the morality behind the foreign aid debate by breaking down the question into two. In the following two sections I will consider the impact of both critical (Hayter, 1971) and neo-classical (Burnside & Dollar, 2000) research on the capabilities approach to answer the question posed by Lancaster.

Nussbaum (2006) loosely defined the moral obligation towards foreign aid and 'living with concern' for others in her 'capabilities list'. For her, 'protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation, and also protecting freedom of assembly and political speech' (pp. 57-58). In the US, the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 gives the main principle of funding as preventing the 'engagement in a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights, including torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, prolonged detention without charges, causing the disappearance of persons by the abduction and clandestine detention of those persons, or other flagrant denial of the right to life, liberty, and the security of person, unless such assistance will directly benefit the needy people in such country' (p. 22; see also U.S. Code § 8422). In fine, there is a strong basis for structural comparison of the moral principles in the capabilities approach and foreign aid.

## 2.1 Critical Approaches to Foreign Aid

The purposes governments pursue with their aid programmes are discussed by Lancaster (2007) and others. However, no one has considered why some governments have severed their ties to aid programmes. After the launch of the long-awaited and controversial peace plan between Palestine and Israel, US President Donald Trump attacked the credibility of the USAID with a hard to grasp logic behind the new state approach to foreign aid.

Unlike independent international organisations like the World Bank or IMF, USAID is an independent agency of the United States federal government and 'the largest official aid agency in the world' (USAID, 2012). However, the drastic turn in the policies implemented by USAID in the Trump administration alled

into the question whether the agency was following the principle that financial assistance is given based on humanitarian need (Santiso, 2001). This needs to be considered in light of US political and military priorities abroad (Mittal, 2006). It can be seen that national self-interest loomed large in the activities of USAID, and that the reasons given were not always utilitarian.

Taking into account the ‘marriage between the development discourse and emergency aid’ in the past almost 40 years, the cuts in funding for the UNRWA, despite their severe negative consequences, could be interpreted as a step forward towards liberation. At the same time, Amartya Sen’s call for taking into account ethical considerations formed a powerful critique of orthodox economics and lent support to critical approaches to foreign aid in conflict zones. The role of conditional aid in economic development has been a concern for Amartya Sen throughout his work on the capabilities approach.

Scholars taking a critical approach to foreign aid have generally not broken the discussion down into separate analytical components (Hayter, 1971). Instead, they have tended to think inclusively about each region and its people in order to overcome ‘the imprisonment of the world’s poor in the trap of international aid’ (Sen, 2006, p. 171). This was in lieu of measuring the relevance and financial applicability of aid policy, in terms of ‘a clear idea about the true socio-economic costs which have been inflicted on the economy as a result of the conflict’ (Taghdisi-Rad, 2011, p. 39).

## **2.2 The Neo-Classical Approach to Foreign Aid**

Lancaster’s second consideration is on foreign aid and why governments and financial institutions chose to give foreign aid rather than some other strategy towards the targeted countries (Lancaster, 2007, p. ix). Unfortunately, the capabilities approach could only demonstrate the nuances of a new alternative framing of aid; it did present a clear argument as a solution to the conflict of interest.

The humanitarian crisis that developed at the beginning of 2019, when UNRWA suffered a historical cut in financial contributions of almost \$400 million (Zanotti, 2018), gave rise to a paradox within the foreign aid debate. The role of USAID as ‘the catalyst of underdevelopment and regression rather than of growth and development’ (Veltmeyer, 2011) in Palestine and the Near East region cannot be supported by the neo-classical approach to foreign aid either. Neo-classicists

have been in complete denial of the political aspects of aid while seeking purely economic results (Boone, 1995; Burnside & Dollar, 2000). The commitment of 'the United States [to] intensify dialogue with the United Nations, host governments, and international stakeholders about new models and new approaches, which may include direct bilateral assistance from the United States and other partners, that can provide today's Palestinian children with a more durable and dependable path towards a brighter tomorrow' (Nauert, 2018) pushed the debate in a more left-leaning direction politically. The action taken was 'based on such a fundamentally flawed misunderstanding of the situation that it may have the opposite of its intended effect' (Amr, 2018). The promotion of 'good governance' and financial assistance was rejected, on an unclear basis, despite there being a significant humanitarian need (Santiso, 2001).

A reassessment of the orthodox conceptualisation of the capabilities approach leads, as we have seen, to the recognition that stability in the region can be reached only if the political issues and the lack of personal/political freedoms of individuals are considered and dealt with on a separate level from the economic freedoms. Based on Nussbaum's (2006) affirmation of the ability 'to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other humans, to engage in various forms of social interaction, to be able to imagine the situation of another' (pp. 57-58), there is a need for structural legal reasoning to coordinate the relationship between multilateral and bilateral institutions. This has led to a call for further research.

## Conclusion

In the first part of this paper, I presented what I called the aesthetics of the capabilities approach on the most general and theoretical level. Major principles of the capabilities scholarship include pluralism about values, treating each person as an end, focusing on choice and freedom rather than achievement, and including a prescriptive/normative character so as to overcome injustice. I discussed the Tanner Lectures of both Amartya Sen and Martha C. Nussbaum from 1979 and 2003, respectively, presenting the capabilities approach as both an economic and moral theory. They used it as a platform to raise awareness of alternatives to mainstream position in economics and the idea of a social justice contract and offer some practical solutions to battle the persistence of poverty, the occurrence of famine, and the meeting of elementary needs. Through their collaboration in

the late 1980s and early 1990s, Sen and Nussbaum (1993) brought together a range of ideas across the fields of heterodox economics, ethics, and political philosophy that had been previously excluded from or were incompetently applied through the conventional methods of welfarism. While in essence their respective scholarship originates from the same idea, there is some disparity between justice and happiness, as measured in terms of certain mental states, can be achieved. The obvious ambiguity of the approach was highlighted by the classical utilitarian John S. Mill's conceptions of political and economic freedom (1869).

The essence of the capabilities approach is part of an effort to overcome the long-lasting consequences of imperialism and treat non-Western cultures with equal concern (Sen, 2010) by producing a theory engaged with both the economic and ethical issues of development. In these more than economic terms, the market-oriented era of the 1980s with its structural adjustments was inadequate no less than in its allowance for greater individual freedoms. This can be approached by reconsidering the debate on foreign aid through the reconstructed utilitarian version of the capabilities approach. The conclusions drawn from the case study on the multilateral relations between USAID, UNRWA, and the governmental bodies of Palestine and the Near East, are illustrative in this regard. The capabilities scholars attacked only the most simplified versions of utilitarianism (Warke, 2000), thus giving short shrift to the promise of battling economic deprivation. Furthermore, it has become evident that the capabilities approach scholarship inclines towards the building of an inclusive legal framework. It needs to be more considered instead of reliance on the the evaluation metrics focused not on people's lives but only international institutions too, and thus too indebted to the orthodox interpretations of the capabilities approach – Nussbaum's and the presented here utilitarian one.

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# 21

## THE POLITICS OF (MIS-) INFORMATION: LESSONS FROM COVID-19 ON DISCOURSE, DIGITAL GOVERNANCE, AND DEMOCRACY

*Saudamini Sigdel*

### **Abstract**

While the scourge of online misinformation has been a recurring theme of concern across the world in the past decade, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a concerning upsurge. In doing so, it highlighted not only the challenges to public health and welfare that viral misinformation can pose but also the possibility of engendering a highly divided ‘post-truth’ world. This paper explores the root causes of misinformation, breaking down how different actors—including politicians, social media companies, and everyday citizens and consumers—contribute to its spread. Using a detailed analysis of wide-ranging academic and news sources, it discusses how patterns of misinformation spread during the pandemic link to broader trends in contemporary politics. In particular, it underscores the interdependent relationship between the rise in the spread of ‘fake news’ and rising rates of hyper-partisanship, or divisive and assortative political engagement. While bringing attention to relevant perils to public well-being and democracy, especially in the face of an increasingly digitally-mediated political world, this paper also examines potential solutions and safeguarding measures for the future.

### **Introduction**

If history is to be categorised in epochal shifts, there is little debate that what we are now in an ‘Age of Information’. Most of global society has entered a post-industrial stage characterised by the predominance of digital technology and its integration into numerous facets of social and political life (Baez, 2014). But while information technology is flourishing, information as we know it in a discursive

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sense is facing perhaps its biggest challenge yet. This challenge comes from none other than its antithesis—misinformation. It is no coincidence that these two trends are occurring concurrently: the digital sphere and the spread of misinformation are now two sides of the same coin, working together in a complex symbiotic alliance. Especially salient has been the advent and sharp surge in the use of social media, which has proven to be a suitable vector for the spread and multiplication of misinformation.

The past year, much dominated by the scourge of the coronavirus pandemic, has made this topic all the more relevant. At this unprecedented juncture where a deadly, high-stakes crisis is still playing out in an era of digital news proliferation, we are discovering the true ills of misinformation. This has engendered debate around the idea that we are now suffering from two crises: a viral pandemic and a global plague of misinformation, together creating a unique challenge often hailed as an ‘infodemic’ (WHO, 2020). In this paper, I explore this connection. Although some make a distinction between unintentionally inaccurate information and inaccurate information presented intentionally for malevolent purposes (the latter increasingly termed *disinformation*), I use the term ‘misinformation’ to cover both kinds. I will analyse its transmission and impact on states and citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the post-pandemic recovery phase. Finally, I will discuss possible solutions that could be adopted to strengthen a society’s resilience to misinformation and strengthen democracy.

### **‘Fake News’: Media and Trends**

#### *Social Media and the Virtual Frontier*

More people use computers and handheld devices to access the news than ever before. In April 2020, 79%, 73%, and 69% of survey respondents from the UK, US, and Germany respectively reported consuming news from online sources including social media, and 47%, 47%, and 39% on just social media (Mayhew, 2020). For content producers, fabricating news stories on the virtual front is now both cost-effective and financially lucrative, raking in tens of thousands of dollars each month with sensationalist headlines, hoaxes and the ad-driven profits they garner (Braun and Eklund, 2019). With very little in the way of mediation or penalisation, it is also very easy for them to incorporate tools of deception such as incendiary ‘clickbait’, out-of-context visual representations, or incorrect

data interpretation (Shu et al., 2017). In addition, readers get to cherry-pick stories and sources, manipulating their own exposure and perception of the political world around them (Spohr, 2017).

Spurious or distorted content can also be strategically implemented to sway public opinion (Humphrecht et al., 2020). Indeed, a glance at the recent history of conspiracy theories on the web reveals the exploitative nature of misinformation. Not only are populist leaders like Trump using the rhetoric of 'fake news' to undermine traditional media sources, they are also encouraging a slew of conspiracy theories bordering on propaganda. To illustrate, political conspiracy theories have ranged from the absurd—such as the the 'pizzagate' theory which insinuated that Democrats were hosting a pedophile ring in a pizza shop—to the politically dangerous, such as the theory that climate change is a ruse concocted by the Chinese government (Bergmann, 2020; Van Prooijen, 2018). In the UK, politicians such as Boris Johnson and Michael Gove have been seen to similarly express support for conspiratorial tales against the EU during the Brexit campaign to consolidate support (Bergmann, 2020). Further augmenting these false theories and helping them go 'viral' are an army of social bots, or algorithms designed to promulgate misinformation within social networks (Shao et al., 2018).

### *The Rise of Partisan Hyperpolarisation*

A worrying trend in the decades of the 21st century has been the growing polarisation of the public along party-affiliated or ideological lines, propelled by divisive populist leadership and disruption of traditional media (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019). Beyond exhibiting party-aligned political attitudes, people are also increasingly cold towards those on the other end of the political spectrum (Gentzkow, 2016; Carothers and O'Donohue, 2019). Even in the multi-party systems in European countries, patterns indicate that intergroup distrust is becoming more prevalent, cultivating not just 'a few especially militant partisans, but... whole groups who are, on average, extremely hostile towards other parties' (Reiljan, 2020, p. 392). Meanwhile, a US study undertaken between 2016 and 2019 found that 77% of Republicans and 72% of Democrats could not even agree on 'basic facts' (Pew Research Centre, 2019).

This is problematic because the motivation behind the consumption and sharing of information has started to shift. Far from being based on the desire to evaluate evidence in order to inform one's political reasoning, the decision to read and

circulate certain news pieces is now increasingly *informed by* one's existing political reasoning (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017). Especially when it comes to controversial topics in public policy—such as immigration, healthcare, reproductive rights, or, as we have seen with COVID-19, crisis management—blurring the lines between fact and opinion in this way sets a dangerous precedent.

Social networks play a significant role in enabling this divide. They appear especially to encourage practices of *homophily*, or the tendency for individuals to seek out those similar to themselves—the most attractive similarity being political opinion. This creates metapopulations existing separately in virtual spaces and within them circulating information that fits their political narrative, devoid of any formal regulations to ascertain the validity of the information presented (Starnini et al., 2016). Digital platforms have become fertile grounds for such assortative grouping, stimulated by two intersecting social phenomena. The first is *naïve realism*, which is the belief that an individual's own perception of life and truth is objective, while those of others who hold opposing opinions are prejudiced, uneducated, or illogical (Shu et al., 2017). The second is *confirmation bias*, which is the tendency for individuals to search for and interpret information in such a manner that validates or reinforces their pre-existing beliefs and value systems (Ling, 2020).

While these exist outside of the digital landscape as well, the structural designs of social media actively foster and sustain information biases. According to Westerman et al. (2020), a distinctive feature of these platforms is ubiquitous exposure to user-generated content: patterns indicate that content from peers and fellow netizens—especially those who appear attitude-consistent with the user—tends to hold greater persuasive power than mass media messages. However, even with professional or pseudo-professional news sources, users of the Internet have the freedom and convenience to selectively expose themselves to value-aligned perspectives alone, while disengaging with discrepant information. Despite the credibility of the source, or lack thereof, users are thus prone to exercise motivational reasoning and share false information that is consistent with their views (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017). Meanwhile, algorithms are designed so that an individual's feed and content exposure are tailored according to their past engagement patterns, effectively creating an insulated echo chamber or 'filter bubble' (Spohr, 2017).

## Misinformation in the Age of COVID-19: A Novel Challenge

### *The Role of Social Media, Leaders, and the Citizen Journalist*

As we have seen, global society was already rife with misinformation prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, trends observed since its onset indicate that periods of crisis are heavily conducive to widespread circulation of misinformation. A US study analysing patterns in media consumption has discovered that the proportion of citizens who were typically disengaged with the news but have started engaging with it in all formats since the latter half of March 2020 increased by 62% (Casero-Ripolles, 2020). As the source of news for many is now the Internet, there is a higher susceptibility to encountering false information. For instance, during March 2020, more than 27% of YouTube videos relating to the virus contained untrue 'facts' and figures (Oi-Yee Li et al., 2020). Similarly, both Facebook and Twitter have been facing substantial challenges with the expeditious outflow of factitious or reconfigured information during this time (Frenkel et al., 2020).

The trajectory of the spread of online misinformation suggests that high-profile political figures play a significant role. Not only is their reach wider than that of non-political actors; their rhetoric is often construed and weaponised for political purposes. By way of illustration, we can look at Brazil, which has had among the highest numbers of COVID-19 cases in the world (De Lima et al., 2021). According to a Harvard study, the spread of disinformation regarding the virus dramatically increased following President Jair Bolsonaro's public speeches in the early stages of the pandemic, aligning closely with Bolsonaro's downplaying of the severity of the virus (Soares et al., 2021). Another study, analysing 38 million articles on the coronavirus around the globe, found that former US president Donald Trump was associated with 37.9% of all misinformation, making him the 'largest driver' of misinformation during the pandemic (Evanega et al., 2020). Such public figures and celebrities have a disproportionate impact: in a recent study, despite making up only 20% of overall misinformation about COVID-19, top-down misinformation drove 69% of engagement on digital platforms (Brennen et al., 2020).

Finally, the pandemic has highlighted some of the ethical quandaries of citizen journalism. This unexpected crisis has gotten people talking more so than ever before, independently of engagement with purported news sources or public



figures. This has been, arguably, beneficial in many cases. For instance, reports from residents of Wuhan during the early stages of the pandemic offered the world the first glimpses into the ensuing crisis, which would not have been possible otherwise due to China's stringent media censorship (Wang, 2020). However, user-generated content is not bound by journalistic codes of ethics and may therefore be relatively unscrupulous and prone to virtue-signalling (Al Jababneh & Safori, 2020). While person-to-person spread on a large scale is generally unlikely for public health misinformation, this control is diminished the bigger the platform of the user and the more frequently users with a large number of followers share this content (Swire-Thompson & Lazer, 2020).

*Barriers to Effective Governance and Crisis Management*

A crucial determinant of effective virus management is strong governance and the cooperation of the public. According to a report synthesising the observations of 100 officials of the European Union, successful management of the crisis is a function of active collaboration with all actors within a society, 'as regards not only complying with confinement measures but also the direct involvement in initiatives that support or complement the action of public bodies' (Council of Europe, 2020). The complication with misinformation is that discrepancy between scientific or official advice and the false information which, when a large portion of the public acts upon can it, seriously undermine public health strategies.

Challenges to public health during the course of the pandemic may be categorised into two broad and interconnected areas: protective measures and vaccine compliance. The two main preventive measures mandated across most countries as per official health recommendations are physical distancing of at least one metre and wearing face coverings (WHO, 2021). The effect of belief in misinformation on compliance with these two measures has been shown to be negative and significant, while there also appears to be a strong link between personal beliefs about these measures and behaviour (Hornik et al., 2020). With the tendency of many people to seek out information congruent with their beliefs, misinformation can further intensify defiance. Furthermore, the perception of being inundated with intentionally deceiving information can add a layer of apathy regarding the crisis, making people more likely to resist interventions (Hameleers et al., 2020).

All this threatens the success of vaccination programmes. As countries look now to vaccinate their vulnerable populations and eventually the bulk of their citizen

base, there are a plethora of vaccine hoaxes spreading online. For example, some popular theories are that authorities have invented the severity of the coronavirus, that it is a ploy to make money for pharmaceutical companies, that vaccines cause autism in children, or that Bill Gates wants to implant a microchip into all humans through a mass-vaccination programme (University of Bristol & King's College London, 2021). Based on recent research, we know that susceptibility to such information can greatly increase vaccine hesitancy in individuals (Roozenbeek et al., 2020). This susceptibility is dependent to a large degree on information consumption patterns: in the UK, unwillingness to get vaccinated due to a fear of conspiracy 'is held by much greater proportions of those who say their knowledge comes from DuckDuckGo (50%), Instagram (43%), WhatsApp (40%), YouTube (37%), Bing (34%), Facebook (31%) and Twitter (29%)' (University of Bristol and King's College London, 2021). Although individuals may be skeptical about some false theories, repeated exposure to anti-vaccine content can reinforce and further anchor these concerns—ultimately reducing the overall vaccine uptake (Ling, 2020).

Not only is misinformation a danger to public health, it can also result in unnecessary strains on public resources. Also, protests against lockdown measures, masks, or vaccines are in most cases driven by misinformation or the failure to attribute government action to concern for the collective good (Carothers & Press, 2020). Misinformation about remedies, such as taking chlorine dioxide or injecting household disinfectants, have put many at risk of poisoning and overburdened poison centres and emergency rooms (Mian and Khan, 2020; Rose, 2020). In Iran, the erroneous belief that methanol treats the coronavirus proved fatal, taking the lives of 728 people between February 20 and April 7 of 2020 (Aljazeera, 2020).

In some cases, misinformation has taken another vicious turn, causing direct or indirect harm to people and property. After Trump touted the unverified benefits of the anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine, the US faced a shortage in supplies that led to many patients needing the drug for medical reasons not being able to obtain it (Samuels & Kelly, 2020). Another theory, that 5G networks are responsible for the coronavirus, fomented more than 150 cases of vandalism and arson to 5G masts and other telecommunications infrastructure across Europe, with 87 in the UK alone as of October 2020 (Cuthbertson, 2020). Meanwhile, theories of the Chinese manufacturing of the coronavirus for political reasons have contributed to stigmatisation and anti-Asian discrimination in the US

and other Western countries (Da Silva, 2020). Doubts and uncertainty sparked by information also engender fragility to those with malicious intent, leading to a surge in phishing and cyberattacks, where people are misled into clicking harmful links and documents claiming to contain information relevant to the virus (Frenkel et al., 2020).

## **What Next? Difficulties and Implications**

### *Managing the Post-Pandemic Recovery*

Nations across the world are hopeful that the era of stringent lockdown and social distancing measures might slowly come to an end with the successful implementation of vaccination programmes. Yet this is far from the end of the road for most states and policymakers, who have to make very difficult choices regarding the next stages of crisis management. The most immediate concerns are about the deployment of vaccines, as true mass protection and herd immunity cannot be achieved until the safety net of the vaccine system covers the majority of the adult populations throughout the world. There are numerous geopolitical and logistical challenges involved in this, but the biggest issue—especially for low-income and ethnic minority communities—remains low levels of vaccine confidence (Wouters et al., 2020). The pandemic has also underscored the importance of improving the capacity of healthcare infrastructure such as the UK's NHS. Reforming and modernising healthcare systems is a complicated process and will require major policy and budgetary upheavals (Keogh, 2021).

Similarly, the policies and decisions that were needed during the worst of this crisis are likely to leave footprints for many years to come. In terms of education, many countries have experienced a certain degree of disruption to learning due to a lack of access to remote learning materials; this impact is mostly felt in developing countries and is also extremely gendered. According to UNESCO (2020), approximately 11 million schoolgirls will not be returning to the classroom after the pandemic, and this has detrimental effects on not just their personal well-being but also on the long-term economic performance of their countries. Another challenge is the economic downturn caused by the pandemic and the resultant unemployment rates. In what is being called the COVID-19 global recession, forecasts predict that this shock will have long-term macroeconomic consequences, 'with no country escaping unscathed' (Chudik et al., 2020). Policymakers face

immense difficulties designing robust plans for recovery, especially for the hard-hit labour market (Fuentes & Moder, 2021). Citizens and leaders alike are also voicing the desire to use this opportunity to transform the global political economy, stressing the need for a more sustainable and equitable economic model and a global 'green recovery' (European Parliament, 2021; Fears et al., 2020).

The biggest threat from misinformation to the successful implementation of these countermeasures can be anticipated to arise from the politically motivated nature of much fabricated or altered content. Historical evidence tells us that the after-shocks of financial crises have a heightened polarising effect, especially in terms of attracting people towards the divisive polemics of the far right (Funke et al., 2015). At a time when people in these segregated camps cannot agree on basic ideas such as climate change or the rights of migrants and minorities—let alone on economic approaches—the spread of misinformation can create a hostile political climate and hamper the creation and administration of sound policies.

#### *Balancing for the Future of Democratic Politics*

Misinformation clearly poses numerous obstacles for the global political economy in the aftermath of COVID-19, but it also warrants concerns about the smooth functioning of our very political structures over the long run. It must be noted that the future too is subject to contingencies of all types and scales of magnitude, many of which might require similar or greater strength in governance and democracy to tackle them effectively. Indeed, the twenty-first century already shows signs of several momentous crises to come. These include climate change, with the likelihood of countries across the world—albeit to varying degrees—having to overcome the economic and humanitarian complications arising from extreme weather events, displacement, food insecurity, water shortages, growing disparities, and more (Bernauer, 2013; Stern, 2009). While this effect can be predicted and managed to a certain extent, global economics and financial markets are also susceptible to various risks that may not be perceived adequately in advance—including the risks associated with geopolitical events, such as wars, tensions, and conflicts (Plakandaras, 2019). Similarly, even with governments having the most sophisticated intelligence or public health assessments, contingencies such as terrorist attacks or the spread of disease can occur at any given time and can lead to an emergency requiring robust national and/or international policy efforts in order to combat them (De Amorim and Guerra, 2020; May et al., 2009).

Exacerbating the trade-offs associated with these risks is the issue of expanding populist-authoritarian forces and polarising political ideologies (Norris, 2017). Since misinformation, hyperpolarisation, and a post-factual political culture tend to amplify and reinforce each other, the world is at risk of facing an era of unprecedented challenges to liberal democracies with respect to a key feature that they rely upon—access to accurate information. Information is the ‘currency of democratic citizenship’: successful politics involves a two-pronged process of citizens being able first to access information that allows them to critically appraise public policy, and then to use this information to inform their decisions and correct any misconceptions (Kuklinski et al., 2000). Accordingly, the traditional role of the media in a democracy used to be that of a watchdog, ‘rooting out and exposing any malfeasance on the part of those in whom the public has placed their trust’ (Mitchell, 2017). But now, with the proliferation of media sources, coupled with the problem of establishing the validity of the information they put out, this role has been upended—leaving a sizable gap between citizens and their democratic currency. This is dangerous and can prove detrimental to the well-being of democracies, especially in the face of periods of crises in the decades to come.

## **From Post-Truth to Truth First: Paving the Way Forward**

### *Digital Accountability and Regulatory Frameworks*

Social media and search engines enable biases and motivated reasoning because there is no systematic framework to encourage users to hold deceptive sources of information up to adequate scrutiny. In June 2020, almost 79% of readers of the Press Gazette responding to a poll agreed that social media giants were doing a poor job of regulating fake content (Ponsford, 2020). Since then, Twitter has started putting labels on false and misleading content, and frequently deleting tweets or suspending accounts deemed to be spreading content that could impair COVID-19 public health strategies through fake news (Clayton, 2021). On top of such strategies, Facebook is launching a campaign to obtain data from users on the sources and effects of fake news to inform its next steps (Spring, 2020). Yet at this stage, these measures are not powerful enough to stop the deluge of fake news, especially with a burgeoning army of bots leading the way. Also of concern are smaller online platforms catering to members on the fringes of political discourse, such as 4Chan or Gab. These are often outside the bailiwick of fact-checkers and may escape top-down pressure for mediation, but attract

a disproportionate number of individuals with pre-aligned hyper-partisan views and a proclivity for creating or sharing misinformation (Zannettou et al., 2019).

It is fast becoming abundantly clear that there is a need for digital reform—not to re-establish the monopoly of legacy news sources or introduce arbitrary gate-keeping, but to introduce a sturdy and comprehensive framework for fact-checking all information posed online as ‘facts’. This is very challenging because often-times information is presented in more nuanced forms than a simplistic true-false dichotomy; moreover, fact-checking every new bit of information—across myriad bot-saturated platforms, threads, and languages—is logistically almost an insurmountable challenge (Full Fact, 2020). Nonetheless, there are promising indications that artificial intelligence and automated fact-checking tools could be used in the near future (Graves, 2018). This effort can be complemented by ‘nudge’ interventions, a behavioural psychology technique that involves prompting a user to think about the veracity of the content before sharing it; this increases the likelihood of their being more discerning about sharing the piece (Pennycook et al., 2020).

While codifying fact-checking and ‘nudging’ regulations into law would partially reduce the spread of misinformation, this is not a complete solution. When it comes to conspiracy theories, for instance, believers already have an anti-establishment attitude which immunises them from fact-checking (Frenkel et al., 2020). Additionally, those with partisan views are prone to interpreting fact-checking as biased: in the US in 2019, 29% of Democrats, 47% of independent voters, and 70% of Republicans said that fact-checkers tend to favour one side over the other (Walker & Gottfried, 2019). And despite the speediest of debunking processes, any piece of information once consumed can create a ‘belief echo’, affecting a susceptible reader’s attitude afterwards, even after correction (Thorson, 2015). This tells us that fact-checking is treating a symptom rather than the root cause of misinformation. Therefore, the main objective while crafting a digital regulations blueprint should be to incentivise tech platforms to revise the algorithmic models that contribute to echo chambers and hyperpolarisation. Another reform could be to increase monetary compensation for traditional news sources on social media platforms. As more websites are beginning to put in place paywalls that alienate their reader base and propel them towards free—and mostly unregulated—content on social media, this measure could help re-establish a zeitgeist of professional media and informational integrity (Mayhew, 2020).

## THE POLITICS OF (MIS-)INFORMATION: LESSONS FROM COVID-19 ON DISCOURSE, DIGITAL GOVERNANCE, AND DEMOCRACY

*Saudamini Sigdel*

Especially as we are facing a time in which there are various media of misinformation, including the possibility of deep-fake technology becoming a mainstream weapon of choice in upcoming years, there is no better time for governments to draft relevant legislation and hold digital platforms to account (Westerlund, 2019). Naturally, this brings up many difficult questions of ethics, free speech, and censorship. A point of concern here is that some leaders may use the fight against fake news to suppress the voices of political opponents and challengers. We have already seen glimpses of this in action in the past year from politicians like India's Modi, Turkey's Ergodan, and Hungary's Áder (McHangama and & McLaughlin, 2020). Nevertheless, it is important to address these questions and introduce formal regulations in order to ensure cohesion in social and political life as this digital age progresses.

### *Discerning Citizens: A Media Literacy Model*

As media channels and content proliferate, it is becoming increasingly evident that democracies can benefit from building ground resilience against the disenfranchising effect of fake news. A step in the right direction would be to empower citizens in their ability to tell apart fact from fiction, thereby facilitating better judgement and decision-making in democratic processes. Leading the way on this front is Finland, which started embedding media education for young children into the national curriculum in 2004. Initial reforms included a range of activities to be practiced in daily life to help children incorporate healthy media habits into their lifestyle, with a primary objective being helping them distinguish between the different types of messages encountered in everyday media interactions (Rantala, 2011). In recent years, Finland's national fact-checking organisation has partnered with schools across the country to equip teachers with the necessary fact-checking and critical thinking skills to impart to their students (Charlton, 2019). A 2019 study reports that Finnish students outperform students from the US in digital literacy skills with social media and online news, signalling that these efforts have come to fruition (Horn & Veermans, 2019).

We can correlate performance in media resilience to how citizens have responded to the COVID-19 crisis. A recent study found that Finland scored the highest in resilience to disinformation, as compared, using a range of performance indicators, with various European and North American countries. Denmark was in second place, while notably, France and the US were at the other end, among the

lowest performers (Humprecht et al, 2020). In the same year, data collected in a cross-study of 32 countries showed that Finnish and Danish residents showed high levels of vaccine confidence, with 81% and 87%, respectively, indicating that they would definitely or probably be getting vaccinated when given the opportunity. Meanwhile, France and the US demonstrated lower levels of vaccine confidence, with 34% and 56%, respectively, indicating that they would probably or definitely *not* get vaccinated (WINMR, 2020).

As traditional media forms give way to newer, more susceptible formats and platforms, and as more and more people across the world are co-opted into becoming consumers of this media, it becomes necessary that policy reflect these changes adequately. As we have seen with these examples, expanding the scope of media education alongside the scope of the media environment can have a significant positive impact on citizens and their decision-making abilities. Promisingly, many countries—including Brazil, France, Italy, and the UK—have now started introducing elements of critical media education to varying degrees; the long-term translation of these initiatives into community resilience against fake news remains to be seen (Lim & Tan, 2020). It is imperative that these measures are not treated as standalone solutions serving as an alternative to media regulation. Instead, a holistic combination of both a top-down regulatory framework and a bottom-up media literacy framework is likely to offer the best protection against the negative repercussions of misinformation.

## Conclusion

We are at a juncture in contemporary politics in which misinformation is omnipresent. The Oxford Dictionary hailed ‘post-truth’ as its Word of the Year in 2016, ushering in an era of unparalleled dispute on the nature of facts (BBC, 2016). In the following year, as ‘alternative facts’ was becoming the buzzword of the season, Collins Dictionary followed suit by crowning ‘fake news’ as their winner (Barrera et. al, 2020; Flood, 2017). These terms are well-entrenched in academic discourse by now, having become more and more germane to our political climate. Misinformation is especially thriving on—and partly because of—the cyber frontier. Misleading, fallacious, or incorrect information may be put out because of ideological divides, motivated reasoning, or a profit incentive. Contemporary digital platforms make it easy to both produce such content and to disseminate it within enclosed circles. This ultimately contributes to wider political discourse



and impacts votes and policy decisions, further disconnecting segments of the population from each other and from the policymakers who represent them.

Against this backdrop, the spread of COVID-19 across the globe has underscored the vulnerabilities that show up in our political systems as a result of widespread misinformation. It has emphasised how governing impactfully through a crisis is made more arduous with a public wrought by homogenous partisanship and distrust in expert or mainstream knowledge. Alarming, it has also shone a light on the types of top-down misinformation spread by politicians and leaders as part of their political narrative. To de-normalise these patterns and prevent the decay of our democracies, which are built upon the sacrosanct value of informed rationality, governments must do more to regulate online platforms used for news consumption while simultaneously investing in media literacy education for their citizens.

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## THE UNPRECEDENTED IMPACTS OF COVID-19 AND GLOBAL RESPONSES

The Democratic Education Network (DEN) is a collaborative group involving academic staff and students that aims to organize and support the educational experience of students at the University of Westminster. DEN has inspired students to engage locally and globally.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, DEN has played a significant role engaging students online, and aiming to facilitate their learning process. This book is a compilation of papers written by both students at the University of Westminster and its partner international universities. The book brings together different topics and concepts related to the governance and management of the global COVID-19 pandemic. It analyses the political, economic, and social impact of COVID-19 on the agendas set by governments all around the world. This edition of the book is a manifestation of DEN's collective teamwork.

"I am so pleased to see the hard work of staff and students in the Democratic Education Network (DEN) come to fruition in this excellent publication. I recognise the value of these collaborations in our turbulent times, and it is lovely to see students and academic staff from all over the world come together to develop meaningful, apposite, and challenging scholarship. Working in partnership with students is such a strength of the culture at the University of Westminster, and it is great to see this work demonstrated so effectively in this text".

**Dr. Andy Pitchford**

Head of the Centre for Education and Teaching Innovation (CETI)  
at the University of Westminster

"A good education seeks to challenge prejudices and make societies more inclusive. Students active in the Democratic Education Network and its book project exemplify this Westminster spirit of critical thinking, holistic education, and compassion. The book is a milestone in the journey of its contributors and that of our university's will to promote student-staff partnership".

**Professor Dibyesh Anand**

Head of School of Social Sciences and  
Co-Chair of University Equality and Diversity



EDITED BY  
**FARHANG MORADY**

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