

Reconnoitering the Nature of Regime: Making sense of responses to COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The primary goal of modern states is to ensure the safety of their citizens. If the state fails to protect the individual's right to life, then the individual has the option of defying. Nevertheless, coronavirus outbreaks have been widespread since last year. It is debatable whether democracy or authoritarian regimes are more effective in protecting citizens' lives during a pandemic. The present paper attempts to conduct a SWOT analysis of various forms of government during the pandemic. This paper also addresses a fundamental question of liberal democracy: to what extent does the state have the right to intervene in the personal domain of an individual. In a situation like Covid-19, quick actions and extensive use of technology are required. This paper tries to reconcile these two measures with the various types of government.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, democracy, authoritarian, regimes, pandemic response.

Introduction

Covid-19 is a contagious virus that causes severe attacks on the respiratory system. In today's period of globalization, when nation-state borders have blurred, people living in the World can freely move between states, containing a transmittable infection to a single location. People living in liberal states are the most prone to this pandemic because they live in a more open society that is more integrated with the international community, especially states like the USA? Until 7th of February 2022, there were 396,343,205 affected people by disease and 5,759,927 (Centre, 2021; GSP Digest, 2021) people worldwide lost their lives, a total of 315,181,677 people have been cured with Covid-19, and as of July 2021 (1), millions of people lost their jobs, and the pandemic hit hard on those, whose life subsistence depended on daily wages; above all, it jeopardized people's right to life. Even under a minimalist state, the government is primarily responsible for protecting its citizens. Thomas Hobbes, a pro-absolutist thinker, justified a revolt against the Leviathan only if he failed to protect the people's lives. Legitimacy is the *sine qua non* for national leaders, a necessary condition, whether democratic or authoritarian (2). The legitimacy of national leaders will be eroded if the death rate of those infected with Covid-19 rises (2). Because the death rate of those infected with Covid-19 is higher in democratic countries (especially America and India) than in authoritarian states, therefore democratic states' legitimacy is under crisis.

The world's oldest and largest democracies, America, United Kingdom, Italy, India etc., were apparently crumbling during the pandemic. Since the beginning of the pandemic, America has had the highest number of Covid-19 patients and deaths, and the world's largest democracy, India, was not far behind (3). The political structures of the democratic countries have been built in such a way that they are in appropriate for controlling epidemics. Democratic states have failed to protect their most valuable asset: their citizens. While China, the top-most authoritarian state, successfully contained the pathogen, the outbreak was brought to a halt in a short period. At the same time, the two democratic East Asian countries of South Korea and Taiwan were able to halt the pandemic without resorting to the world-famous lockdown (4). These two countries gave preference to the security of their citizens, not their privacy, and used the surveillance mechanism exclusively.

Methodology and Literature Survey

For this study, an extensive literature search was done to shed light on the efficacy of various forms of governance in dealing with the epidemic. The following search methods (systematic literature review) were employed to find research papers of possible relevance in databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google engine: "Covid-19 and Political System" and "Covid-19 and Democracy." After that, to filter the search, the review only included research papers that evaluated the efficiency of various kinds of government (Democracy or Authoritarian or Federal or Unitary system) in grappling with the epidemic. Some credible news articles, like- "The Hindu," "The Diplomat," "The Washington Post," "The Guardian," "The Indian Express," were also used as sources of information. The present study is qualitative in nature and based on secondary data. In this study, theoretical, analytical, and comparative methods are used.

The strength of authoritarian governments resides in their centralization of power and their weakness in suppressing information about risks. In a democratic government, transparency makes it difficult to withhold information about potential threats. However, because of the dispersion of power, the speed of response slows down. The best route for democratic states to overcome this vulnerability is to improve their “preventive capability” (5). The empirical investigation revealed that in liberal democratic countries, the pandemic death rate is high. The fundamental reason for this is that the innate characteristics of liberal democracy obstruct the implementation of efficient measures to combat the Covid-19, such as lockdown (6). An authoritarian regime can enforce stricter measures more quickly, but it can also use its power to create cover-ups that turn local outbreaks into worldwide pandemics (7). However, Yexin Mao argues that the authoritarian state has scant information capacity in the early stages of a crisis, but the information capacity becomes stronger later when the crisis escalates, threatening the existence of the authoritarian state (8). Another strand of literature argue that Taiwan and South Korea successfully mitigated the pandemic’s effects, implying that democracies are not inherently inferior to authoritarian in crisis response and that efficiency and effectiveness do not require a dictatorial regime (7). The primacy of Taiwan’s unitary political system and concentration of power in the successful dealing of the pandemic has been overlooked in this study. In the existing literature, the federal state’s response to Covid-19 was primarily evaluated in the context of America’s federal structure (9,10,11,12). Along with this, the available literature has mainly overlooked the questions of how the unitary government structure has shaped the response to Covid-19. This study attempted to fill the gap left by the previous study by conducting a comprehensive analysis of the different forms of governments in the context of the response to Covid-19.

This work aims to find out the most suitable system of governance during a global emergency like the Covid-19 pandemic. In order to achieve this objective, it is vital to evaluate how different types of governments respond to Covid-19. Therefore, America and India (federal- democratic state), China (Authoritarian-unitary state), South Korea, and Taiwan (democratic-unitary state) have been included in this study. It’s also worth noting that the type of political system isn’t the sole independent factor determining a state’s ability to contain the pandemic; other elements like- leadership competency, public trust, and state capability have their own importance. However, to limit the scope of this study, these elements have been excluded.

The Universal Blame Game and Global Non cooperation

This pandemic escalated at a very rapid speed, and the blame-game related to this pandemic spread with the same speed. There are many layers of blame game during this pandemic. The first is among national governments at the international level, linked to the origin of Covid-19. Most of the western states blamed authoritarian China for the birth of the pandemic. In the year 2020, the United States was in the midst of an election season, and the government’s inability to save lives from Covid-19, having the highest number of deaths during the pandemic, while adhering to democratic accountability was enough to guarantee a presidential defeat in the forthcoming elections. Donald trump mirrored the sentiment of his party when he asserted China ‘will do anything to defeat him in the upcoming presidential

elections'. The pandemic's politicization has become a comfortable story for contenders in this regard. The United States and the United Kingdom have repeatedly claimed that China thwarted a Coordinate global response by withholding crucial information regarding Covid-19 (13). On the other hand, in China, a story circulated that Covid-19 was carried there by American military personnel, referring to the military World Games in October, 2019, held in Wuhan (14). This blame game has also contributed to international non-cooperation, weakening the international community's ability to prevent the pandemic. Most of the states fought pandemics independently, without the help of International Organizations and other states.

The second blame game is within the boundaries of nations, primarily found in states with a federal structure, where 'health' is generally the responsibility of the states (Provinces) or local governments, such as in America and India¹. However, the involvement of the centre became increasingly vital because the Covid-19 Pandemic is a global issue and not limited to any state border. The Centre and state governments blame each other for mismanagement while handling the pandemic; when the second wave of the Covid-19 hits its peak in April and May 2021 in India, the vaccination drive accelerated, but along with it, the state governments have blamed the Centre for vaccine inadequacy and discrimination (15). Earlier, the states who sought to vaccinate more people than the adequate availability of vaccines, later blamed the central government for vaccine scarcity. For example, in India, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee tweeted on the 20th of April, 2021, that "Our efforts have been persistent to increase vaccination in the state. Yesterday, the number of doses administered in Kolkata rose to over 39,000 from a daily average of 25,000 vaccinations" (16).

Does the type of Regime matters in fighting pandemic?

Athens is one of the oldest democracies in the World. The Greek historian Thucydides authored a book called 'History of the Peloponnesian War' (431-404 BC), on the war between Athens and Sparta. The plague epidemic that broke out in Athens in the second year of the war was the main reason for the fall of the city-state and eventually of the democracy. The pandemic killed one-third of Athens' inhabitants, including Greek statesman and Athen's General Pericles, who, before the plague struck, believed that he could defeat the enemies. The pandemic began in Ethiopia, then spread to Egypt and Libya before infecting Athenians. The pandemic was more terrible than the war in terms of its severity. A cradle of democracy, Athens would not have been extinguished if the plague had not struck. As a result, pandemics pose an unparalleled threat to democracy since time immemorial.

Francis Fukuyama has presented two types of political models in which; the first represent China's effective authoritarianism system. The central pole of power is the President, with upward accountability. Because the President's power is unrestricted, the decision can be made rapidly, and resources may be pooled and managed effectively in times of crisis. However, the 'bad emperor' problem persists in this model because, in the absence of structured checks and balances, a bad leader can throw the whole country into chaos, as Mao-Tse-Tung's policies resulted in the loss of lives of ten million citizens. The second

¹ 'Public health' is a state government responsibility under Indian and American constitution.

represents the American effective check and balances system. This model will last for a long time because it does not have the issue of the bad emperor. If the executive makes an error, the legislature and the judiciary will correct it (17). However, the concept of a ‘bad emperor’ is an exception rather than a rule of thumb.

The value associated with authoritarian political systems can be termed as more effective in combatting pandemics like Covid-19. China is classified as a collective society, where individual interests are secondary and being an authoritarian state, the lockdown was strictly enforced in China (18). On the other hand, the focal point of liberal democracy in the west is individualism. Because of the increased emphasis on individualism in these societies, it becomes difficult for the government to execute strict measures effectively, such as a lockdown. Americans gathered to the streets to demand the opening of the markets, even when the pandemic was in full swing (19). In addition, Robert Nozick’s libertarian theory, the concept of ‘minimal state,’ this is inadequate in times of emergency or pandemic (20).

A democratic government’s leaders will fear being out of power if they fail to control the pandemic because they represent an accountable government with free flow of information. At the same time, decentralization of power, limited government, and consultation-based decision-making slow down the response to the pandemic (5). Because of the centralization of power in the authoritarian system, quick decisions and decisive responses are possible., which could effectively prevent a pandemic (21). However, the authoritarian incumbent is not afraid of losing power, even if they fail to combat the pandemic, because they represent an unaccountable government that suppresses criticism. Despite this, Legitimacy in an authoritarian political system is based on the government’s performance. As a result, the primary focus of this system is on the preservation of people’s lives and economic development. If an authoritarian system fails to safeguard the citizens, there is always a peril of coup. But, if a democratic state fails to safeguard the lives of its citizens, the government will be changed (22). The Democratic regimes are tended to take popular decisions, not effective decisions. However, in containing pandemics, the primary importance is ‘centralization of power’ because it facilitates decisive and quick decisions to halt the pandemic. Though the article does not advocate for any particular regime, it does seek to draw attention to the need for each country’s regime to be more effective and predictive in the face of pandemic-like threats.

America and China, both the World two superpowers, have sufficient state capacity to deal with the epidemic, but on the one hand, China managed to control covid-19 effectively, and on the other hand, America failed to do so (23). One of the critical reasons for the United States’ failures is that state and local governments are more powerful than the federal government, even when compared to many other modern democracies like France or the United Kingdom (5). The decentralization of powers impaired the state ability to contain the pandemic in America. When strict stay-at-home orders were issued in the majority of states, on the contrary, compliance with Centres’ Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines were contingent on citizen’s wishes in six states, including South Dakota. At the meat processing plant in South Dakota, 450 workers were infected with Covid-19, at the same time when state governors and local authorities were feuding; while the mayor ordered the residents to stay at home, the governor vetoed the order (24). One Wisconsin Supreme Court Judge stated that stay-at-home order is the epitome of tyranny. Therefore, the governor’s

lockdown order was invalidated by the court (25). Rebecca Haffajee correctly said, “That makes it really challenging when we have one town reacting one way and right next door another town reacting in another way. There’s no way their actions don’t affect each other” (24). In America’s absence of centralised decisions, cooperation between the federal government and state governments was vital, but this has not materialised. Many states, including California, Florida, Arizona etc. had declared emergency before the announcement of emergency by the federal government on the 13th of March, 2020 (26). Therefore, America has been classified as a ‘loose model’, based on the procedures used to handle Covid-19 (26). As of the 8th of February, 2021, the cumulative number of cases of Covid-19 in the United States were 78,370,774 with 928,879 lives lost from the pathogen, more than any other country in the World (27).

China is the World’s most populous country with 1,445,622,848 people (23) compared to America’s 333,210,607 (27) and an enormous geographical area, on paper this vast population and geographical area makes it difficult for Chinese authorities to control the pandemic. But the practical reality is totally different. China being a unitary state, “rejects federalism as a political taboo” (28). Due to adherence to the principle of upward accountability, initially, local governments communicate only pleasant news to higher-ranking officials, while suppressing information that exposes errors to avoid political repercussions. As happened in Wuhan during the early stages of Covid-19 infections. Two key leaders in Hubei province and Wuhan municipality were dismissed after the delay and concealment in the early stages were revealed in Wuhan. Based on the principle of ‘Democratic Centralism’, decisions are made centrally by the Communist Party of China, which is not subject to judicial review or violation of fundamental rights of the citizen. Local governments were bound for ensuring the implementation of the decisions of the Central authority. China’s political structure revolves around the notion, “Party, Government, Army, Society and Education- east and west, south and north, the party leads on everything” (29).

The supreme authorities of the Communist Party of China formed the Central Leading Group (CLG) for Covid-19 prevention and control on the 25th of January, 2020, which was the highest decision-making body. It consists of senior members of the Politburo (the political wing of the Communist Party’s Central Committee) and the State Council, led by Premier Li Keqiang. It was in charge of putting a halt to the pandemic. All of the participants have strictly adhered to the CLG guidelines. The CLG reported directly to the CPC Politburo Standing Committee (18). Therefore, despite China’s enormous population, the overall number of Covid-19 cases was only 106,524 with 4,636 people losing their lives (23). The Covid-19 has a mortality rate of 0.7% in China, compared to 1.8% in the United States (Centre, 2021). China has been classified as a ‘tough model’ based on the procedures used to handle Covid-19 (26). The majority of respondents in the global poll thought that China dealt with the Covid-19 better than the United States (30).

India, a federal country, when there were 564 confirmed cases of Covid-19 (The Hindu, 2020), the Central government implemented ‘Total Lockdown’ across India on March 25, based on a centralized decision, rather than entrusting the task to state governments. The lockdown was announced with barely four hours’ notice, as Prime-minister stated in his address to the nation, “Every state, union territory, village and district will be part of this lockdown” (31). Despite disparities in infection rates and health system capabilities, many

criticized India's overly centralised response, which took a uniform approach across the country. Furthermore, the ability of the Centre and States to respond to the social and economic suffering created by stringent lockdown has been severely challenged, particularly for migrant workers in India's enormous unorganised sector (32). Despite this, a country with such a large and dense population contained the first wave of the pandemic because of a stringent statewide lockdown based on centralized decisions. The constitution measures for 'exceptional circumstances,' which included two legislations, the Epidemic Diseases Act (EDA) 1897 and the National Disaster Management Act (NDMA) 2005, empowered the central government to make decisions about how to tackle the epidemic in the way it deemed fit (33). The WHO classified India as a "Cluster Cases" in terms of transmission, while the oldest democratic countries, such as the USA and UK, were classified as "community transmission" (WHO, 2021). Internationally, Indian policy was endorsed (34). However, the second wave of Covid-19, which began in India in mid-march, 2021, proved more hazardous than the first wave. As of July 22, 2021, India was the second leading country in term of number of Covid-19 cases (35).

Despite this, the second wave of pandemic's lockdown was less severe than the first wave (Financial Times, 2022). While the first wave of the pandemic was mainly concentrated in urban areas, the second wave hit rural areas also, and by April 2021, there were more cases of Covid-19 in rural areas than in urban areas (36). Unlike the first wave, in the second wave, instead of centralised decisions and nationwide lockdown, the decision was decentralised, in which the states and local administration were given the right to impose lockdown and curfew. Decentralisation of Power resulted in a series of lockdowns rather than a uniform lockdown. The measures used to contain the pandemic varied not only by states, but also by cities. The lockdown was resorted by states and local administrations when the situation became out of hand. The State governments imposed the lockdown after a daily record of 45,000 cases in Karnataka, 41,953 in Kerala, 26,000 in Tamilnadu, 18,231 in Rajasthan, 19,216 in West Bengal (37). As a result, decentralization of power, lack of uniformity in the lockdown, and decision-making delay at the states level hampered efforts to halt the pandemic. Therefore, centralization of power and decisions is the essential virtue for containing pandemics.

The East Asian democracies, Taiwan and South Korea, successfully managed the Covid-19 pandemic, setting an example for other countries. The well-known fact of the success of these states is that these states have prepared their health system to deal with the pandemic by taking lessons from Severe acute respiratory syndrome SARS (2003) and H1N1(2009). Nevertheless, they share another essential feature: these states' government systems are unitary, with power centralized in the central governments, enabling them for a quick and uniform decision. Both countries have vestiges of authoritarianism (38). Sheena Chestnut Greitens explained how Taiwan and South Korea's authoritarian legacies made the state powerful in combating the pandemic. According to her,

"Taiwan and South Korea have recent authoritarian history, which offers a heightened awareness of the costs of surveillance and experience with the mechanics of redesigning processes and institutions previously used for authoritarian surveillance to render them compatible with democracy" (39).

Lee sang-sin also believes that South Korea's left alive authoritarian structure has strengthened the government's ability to combat the pandemic. The national registration system, which requires phone companies to preserve all their customers' real names and ID numbers, is one of the most visible vestiges of authoritarian rule (40). This is a vital instrument of the authorities to track the person infected with the Covid-19. Simultaneously, East Asian culture is an essential ingredient that enables the state to effectively implement central decisions. As Samuel P. Huntington points out, East Asian culture "emphasized the group over the individual, authority over liberty, and responsibilities over rights" (41). In a nutshell, to contain the pandemic, it is essential to centralize power and decision-making.

The trade-off between Security and Privacy

Individuals' privacy is of vital importance in liberal democracies, and they are referred to as "sacred values" that should not be subjected to trade. However, in the era of globalisation, citizens are concerned about their privacy in democratic regimes. But the pandemic has exacerbated the threat to this basic right. Despite this, studies (42) have shown that people prioritise the right to life over individual privacy, whether they live in a western democracy or any authoritarian state, but the number of such people is not in the majority. It is not undemocratic to impose restrictions on citizens' personal privacy to protect their lives, as long as these restrictions are applied proportionately for specific goals and within a particular time frame. Almost every state used surveillance to halt the pandemic. A study conducted by the University of Oxford found that if around sixty percent of the population use a digital tracing app, the infection of Covid-19 can be reduced or stopped, resulting in the relaxation of the lockdown (43). Limited surveillance can be permitted to save people from starvation, and the economy can be brought back on track.

The trade-off between security and privacy is more explicit in a democratic country like the United States. During the pandemic, a study of 2,000 adults in America was undertaken to determine the level of support for surveillance. Only 42% of respondents, the government should encourage people to install and use contact tracing applications (44). In a study conducted by Washington post-university of Maryland poll finds, the inclination to use a contract-tracing application is evenly split among the smartphone users in America, with half saying they would definitely or probably use one and the other half stating they would not definitely and none probably (45). In collaboration with Google and Apple, a mechanism for tracking Covid-19 spread was developed. The goal is to provide 'track-and-trace-tools' to health authorities all around the World, which will aid in the isolation of the affected population and the reopening of the economy. But the United States has a number of regulations that make it difficult to enforce contract tracing compliance (46). This means you cannot put an individual on surveillance without his consent, and as a result, the public will be less likely to supply accurate and complete information, reducing the effectiveness of these efforts. Even Donald Trump commented on the Google-Apple tracking mechanism, "We have more of a constitutional problem than a mechanical problem..... A lot of people have a problem with it" (46). Aside from legal stumbling blocks, there are also concerns about civil liberty. The key reasons behind the failure of contact tracing applications to be implemented effectively in the World's oldest established democracy like the USA are the

government's constitutional limits, the priority of the right to privacy, and the individualistic society.

In an authoritarian state like China, such a trade-off between security and privacy is unthinkable. In such states, the emphasis is primarily on 'Performance Legitimacy', with the people's security remaining the primary concern. Surveillance was strengthened in the aftermath of SARS (2003) and under Xi Jinping's presidency (47,48). While the primary goal of enhancing surveillance in the post-SARS era was to boost state capacity to deal with the future epidemic (47) and during Xi Jinping's reign, the goal was to consolidate its authority (48). During the pandemic, the usage of this surveillance was beneficial in halting the spread of the Covid-19. The health code app, designed by public security officials in partnership with private business companies like Alibaba and Tencent, collects data on people's movements, contacts, and biometric data like body temperature. In China, it was made compulsory for every citizen to enter their personal information, including medical information, travel history, and Covid-19 contact history, into this app. After that, a coloured Quick Response (QR) code is generated, with each colour indicating their level of health risks. A green QR code permits a person to move inside the city; a yellow code indicates potential dangers and necessitates a 7-14 days quarantine at home; and a red code compels a 14-days quarantine at home or a centralised site (49). Along with this, drones with facial recognition capabilities were deployed, which warned those who were not wearing masks in public places (50). A drone advises an elderly lady to wear a mask, "Yes auntie, this drone is speaking to you. You shouldn't walk about without wearing a mask. You'd better go home, and don't forget to wash your hands" (51).

South Korea is a Unitary state, culturally collectivist society with a recent history of authoritarianism and more concentrated powers than the United States and India. Therefore, the trade-off between security and privacy is likely negligible. Authorities have wide access to personal information, including bank records, GPS data, and surveillance footage of proven and suspected Covid-19 sufferers. Those, who have violated obligatory quarantine, are required to wear electronic bracelets to alarm authorities if they attempt to remove them or leave their confined location. After the outbreak of MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) in 2015, legislators in South Korea weakened privacy protection laws, allowing for easier access to private data. As a result, authorities can access personal data without a warrant in the event of a pandemic. After a 35-year-old Polish male tested positive for Covid-19 in Seoul, his movements' information (without his name) for the previous two days was released on the official website as follows:

"After arriving at Seoul's Incheon airport at about 9.00 a.m., the man took an express train to local metro station, where, wearing a mask, he shopped at a nearby E-Mart grocery store. He then returned home before getting dinner five hours later at an Italian restaurant in Seoul's Taiwan neighborhood popular with foreigners. He was still wearing a mask, but took it off while eating" (40).

Although extensive personal information regarding Covid-19 patients was revealed, even then, according to a *Realmeter* poll conducted in March 2020, 89.1 percent of the population approves of the government's tracking activities (52). Because of the effective use of surveillance, there was no need to deploy measures like lockdown; as a result, the state was spared from economic disaster.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, it can be said that decentralization of powers, limited government, and the primacy of individual's rights to privacy are the cornerstones of democracy, yet these elements have become the major impediment to protecting the democratic state's most valuable assets, its inhabitants' lives, from pandemic. In old-established democratic nations, it is onerous to change the decentralized system to deal with the pandemic. But highly rigid democratic components reveal the democratic state's political structure fragility. It should be noted that the present analysis serves as an example for other countries to learn from those who have successfully dealt with similar issues. Though the article does not advocate for any particular regime, it does seek to draw attention to the need for each country's regime to be more effective, adaptive, flexible and predictive in the face of pandemic-like threats.

This pandemic has eroded the decades-old supremacy of liberal democratic institutions. However, the type of political system is less relevant than the centralization of power and decision-making. Despite having distinct political systems, authoritarian, unitary democratic, and federal democratic states were able to mitigate the pandemic by centralization of powers and decisions; this became possible because the state molded its political structure according to the circumstances. The essence of the authoritarian system is the concentration of powers, and there is no check on the executive's powers; this element gives an advantage to the authoritarian system over democratic regimes to fight the pandemic. However, the federal governments can be converted into unitary governments to handle the situation like a pandemic or any other emergency. Even Article 352 of the Indian Constitution provides the same to handle the national emergency. Nevertheless, these measures should be within the ambit of law for a limited time. At the end of the pandemic, parliament and the judiciary should review the executive's extraordinary powers during the pandemic to avoid power abuse. Furthermore, a culture built on collective society serves as the primary facilitator in ensuring that citizens effectively follow these central decisions. Surveillance has proven to be a highly efficient method of combating the pandemic, with citizens in East Asian countries accepting government surveillance activities while those in the old-established democracy are reluctant to use tracking apps. In an individualistic society, extensive thrust to privacy creates hindrances in curbing out the pandemic.

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