Democracy and the Virus: A Series of Reflections

The Athens Democracy Forum has asked some of our past and future speakers for their thoughts on how the current crisis is impacting democracy, and the lessons to be learned. We are posting their responses to a series of questions on a rolling basis.

One Crisis Fuels Another



By Juan Guaidó

ADF: How are the various governmental responses to the coronavirus impacting democracy in the short and long term?

Juan Guaidó: Our democracy and our people have been under attack and our healthcare system was in ruins well before the pandemic. In fact, just this past week the UN Human Rights Council released its findings that since 2014, Nicolàs Maduro and other top officials have been involved in killings, torture, violence and disappearances aimed at suppressing political opposition and generally terrorizing the population. According to the UN report, Maduro and his ministers of interior and defense were not only aware of the crimes, but gave orders, coordinated operations and supplied resources. So, while many countries struggle with how controlling the virus impacts their democratic institutions and liberties, in Venezuela, we have a reverse situation: the complete lack of democratic institutions and the long-term corruption of the Maduro regime has made Venezuela completely impotent in addressing the greatest global healthcare crisis in more than a century.

The lack of true democracy and even a minimally functional healthcare system is a major cause of the spread of the disease within Venezuela. Money that should have been invested in

strengthening our healthcare system at this critical time has instead been diverted into the pockets of the Maduro regime, leaving our people even more vulnerable.

The regime has completely abandoned the Venezuelan people during the current pandemic, lying to the Venezuelan people about the extent of the crisis. Because of decades of corruption and neglect of our healthcare infrastructure, it is completely incapable of providing even the most rudimentary care to our citizens. Our healthcare workers do not have the necessary personal protective equipment, nor do they have the medical equipment and treatments needed to address this worldwide crisis.

Is there a place for deliberative democracy in times of crisis, or is it simply too much of a luxury?

Not only is there a place for deliberative democracy, there is a necessity for participatory democracy. This is especially true in all crises such as the coronavirus pandemic, but it is an essential element in providing a clear, cohesive and effective response to the emergency.

Across the world, democratic countries instill confidence. Strong, effective democratic institutions encourage citizens to cooperate with the policy choices made. They feel part of the solution, not merely victims of the problem.

In Venezuela, the Maduro regime has dangerously mismanaged this crisis from the very beginning and we know of numerous instances where they even have changed the causes of death of many Covid-19 victims to deceive the people of Venezuela about the true extent of the virus.

The lack of democratic institutions is making the situation far worse for the people of Venezuela. We have called upon the international community to implement the Emergency Government called for by our National Assembly to allow the people of Venezuela to not only fight this terrible pandemic but to restore our healthcare system for the benefit of all Venezuelans and end the suffering of the Venezuelan people.

What role can and should big tech play in helping "flatten the curve"? Are there any risks inherent in this approach?

Technology can and should be the key to opportunity without economic or ethnic bias. In Venezuela, today there is no electricity, there is no gasoline, there are no functioning schools, there is no food, there is no medicine, there is no healthcare system. Tragically only hope and the courage of the Venezuelan people remains. Thus, while "Big Tech" can play an incredibly influential role in flattening the curve, due to the previous systemic looting of our national resources by the Maduro regime, everything is in ruins and the resources that would have enabled "Big Tech" are probably in bank accounts scattered around the world.

Now, due to the criminal neglect and systemic diversion of resources from the coffers of our healthcare institutions into the pockets of the regime's henchmen, the people of Venezuela are at the mercy of the novel coronavirus. Many healthcare workers cannot even find gasoline, so simply getting to work is a battle in and of itself.

Should there be any limitations on the curtailing of civil liberties when citizens' health is at stake?

Unless and until the Maduro regime cares more about our people's health than the dictator's wealth, the people will be held hostage to their government and this deadly virus.

Today, Venezuela lacks the civil liberties central to the question asked. We do not truly have freedom of speech, free and fair elections, the ability to live free from government-sponsored terrorism, or the most basic democratic institutions guaranteed, preserved and protected by those who read this. Even though our National Assembly was elected with an overwhelming mandate and established an Interim Government under strict adherence to the Venezuelan Constitution, those freedoms do not exist.

The exact opposite is true. The people of Venezuela are counting on the world's great democracies to speak effectively and forcefully on their behalf.

Not only do the people of Venezuela need trained, motivated, equipped healthcare professionals, they call upon all democratic nations to immediately help end the suffering of the Venezuelan people by supporting the immediate implementation of the Emergency Government they voted for via their support for our National Assembly. Their health and well-being are not only in the hands of our incredibly brave frontline healthcare workers, who fight for them each day with inadequate equipment, but they are in your hands, as well. Your support of their explicit will for democracy is key to changing the prognosis of the people of Venezuela.

Juan Guaidó is the president of the National Assembly of Venezuela and is recognized as the legitimate interim President of Venezuela by 60 countries and the Organization of American States.