

Democracy and the Virus: A Series of Reflections

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

Opportunities for Abuse, and Action



By Annika Savill

ADF: How are various governmental responses to Covid-19 impacting democracy in the short and long term?

AS: This Covid-19 issue of response and democracy is one for close monitoring and continuous vigilance. The crisis has opened up a toolbox for governments inclined to constrain democracy – including banning gatherings; postponing elections; ruling by decree; restricting information flows or even imposing censorship; conducting invasions of privacy or downright surveillance in the name of tracing the virus. Some journalists, human rights defenders and other independent voices have been threatened or detained for speaking out about the extent of the pandemic in their countries, or about the measures adopted in response. Some governments have enforced internet restrictions and shutdowns, which prevent the public from accessing vital information about how to protect themselves against the virus, or from working remotely so that they can practice safe social distancing.

Of course, some of these restrictive measures are epidemiologically necessary. But some are used to seize the moment at a time when populations are fearful and when civil society groups are less able to fight back. There is a real risk that even initially necessary constraints will remain in place for longer than warranted. They pose the biggest danger where democracy's roots are shallow and institutional checks and balances are weak. For the past few years, increasing numbers of restrictive laws had already hampered civil society's freedom to operate. The pandemic enables some governments to further shift the balance of power in their favor.

Think back to 2019. It will be remembered as the year of protests and mass movements for democracy – in both autocracies and liberal democracies and across six continents. 2020 will be

remembered as the year when these movements were forced off the streets and online – a trend that will long outlast the pandemic itself – with all the challenges that brings in scope for government suppression, interference, and closing civic space.

The nationalist retreat from multilateralism has made things worse. At an early stage of the pandemic, UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for an articulated and coordinated response among nations North and South. The opposite has happened, increasing the risk of a protracted crisis and a second wave between continents.

Is there a place for deliberative democracy in times of crisis?

Never waste a crisis, the saying goes. This applies to both sides of the equation. Just as this pandemic offers a range of opportunities for governments interested in limiting democracy, so does it open a window for civil society to explore new modalities in practicing democracy. In many countries, democratic and non-democratic alike, civil society movements are filling in gaps left by governments – providing essential services, disseminating information about the virus, protecting marginalized groups, partnering with businesses and public authorities to support local communities for economic and social relief, forming alliances to hold governments to account.

The UN Democracy Fund, which I head, is working closely with civil society to address and counteract the wide range of ways the Covid-19 crisis may impair democracy and increase authoritarianism. The projects we manage have swiftly answered our call to action and are pivoting their work to address a range of acute Covid-19 issues and needs:

- developing media literacy and digital safety, more critical than ever as activism is forced online, to address the risk of suppression, interference and closing of civic space
- fighting misinformation, disinformation and hate speech, which have mushroomed in the crisis
- training journalists remotely to report on the impact of the pandemic with in-depth, fact-checked coverage, while staying safe on the front line
- empowering women against gender-based violence, which has surged amid Covid-19 lockdowns, quarantines, and social and economic pressures
- helping to highlight the challenges of inequality and weak service delivery made worse by the crisis, with specific focus on the needs and rights of women, youth, minorities and other marginalized populations, in order to help hold governments to account

In the style of government itself, it does appear that those countries with a more collaborative and collective style of leadership, empathetic and inclusive of civil society, have achieved a more effective and accepted response against the pandemic – which may say something about why governments led by women are in that group. This will be important to remember as the world enters recovery mode and seeks to build back better, amid social and economic devastation.

Annika Savill is executive head of the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF), a trust fund of the UN Secretary-General which strengthens the voice of civil society, promotes the rule of law and human rights, and encourages the participation of all groups in democratic processes.