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DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE AND COVID-19

Dr. Shalini Kapur

Commerce Department, Christ Church College
Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India

A democracy rests upon the principles of majority rule and individual rights. Here, people have the right to participate in the decision-making process and the elected leader is always accountable to the citizens. The citizens also have a lot of fundamental liberties which might be missing in other forms of government. When the pandemic hit, all the countries were highly affected and the type of governance played a huge role in fighting the virus and the recovery that followed.

From the ending months of 2019 to the present date, the whole world has been under the consequences and destruction caused by the novel coronavirus pandemic which traces back to Wuhan, China. The pandemic caused huge scale destruction in terms of people dying due to the virus, the whole healthcare system, and economies crashing. Governments dealt with the pandemic in their own ways, making decisions within their power spectrum and doing what was best for their country. After almost a year of us living in the “new normal”, it seems like the democratic governments can handle the pandemic better because of their different working and ruling styles. The COVID-19 pandemic has proved to be one of the greatest and most unexpected challenges that countries have faced in many years. Everybody understands that a strong and effective multilevel-governance is essential to prevent, identify and manage pandemics. Transparency, honesty, flexibility, capacity and coordination are instrumental to good governance. Moreover, the response must ensure compliance with the fundamental values of democracy, human rights and rule of law. Many surveys of the governments were conducted with a view to better understanding their needs in the context of the pandemic.

Initially, the country’s worst hit by the pandemic were democracies according to the death per capita. Slow decision-making process, inadequate medical facilities proved fatal while handling the pandemic. But at the same time, since these inefficiencies are also called out by the opposition parties, democracies were also quick to spring into action to the overcome the pandemic.

In huge democracies like the United States, India, and New Zealand the pandemic has revealed a whole new side of democratic working. To better understand and analyze the whole crisis situation we will draw an analysis about how different countries handled the pandemic.

The authoritarian government of China is responsible for the largest population in the world. Learning from previous pandemics like SARS, China was well prepared when they were hit by the novel coronavirus. The city of Wuhan was placed under lockdown with all sorts of public activities being suspended. Health and Safety Checkpoints were established, schools were closed down. China ramped up the production of surgical masks and people were forced to follow safety measures. So, by being authoritative China was able to curb the pandemic by implementing aggressive lockdown strategies. But at the same time, it lacked something very crucial and that is transparency and gaining public trust. Journalists and media channels were suppressed and detained. (Burki, 2020) Their own citizens were not told what was happening right outside their houses. Dr. Li Wenliang was arrested for warning other people and he himself died later due to the virus. In March when China claimed Wuhan to be “virus-free”, soon reports started to surface which said the contrary. (Alon, Farrell, & Li, 2020) (Otaola, 2020)

A number of deaths and cases were underreported and the definition of confirmed cases for China was different than the whole world hence, fewer cases. There was no sort of transparency to reassure the citizens of their safety. According to official reports, reported deaths in Wuhan were around 3869 but based on a large number of urns distributed it should be somewhere around 59,000 (Alon, Farrell, & Li, 2020). For China, hiding the truth was more important than handling the virus. To the whole pandemic, China reacted by suppressing information and feeding wrong numbers to the public. People were forced to do things and decisions were taken without considering the implications it would have on the general public. There is no opposition party, no press, and no free and fair elections. As a result, no one checks the government. The truth is withheld and false information is fed to the people and to the world.

The countries worst hit by the pandemic were the democracies. But with adaptability and resilience, they were quick to regain the public trust through their policies and safety measures taken. The pandemic proved the democracies to be more accountable and responsive. This statement can be supported by the fact that all the democratic nation leaders were vocal about the problems posed by the pandemic and delivered true figures to their public. The epicenter of democracies is its people and the fear of being replaced. They



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face criticism, scrutiny, and elections. So, the leaders recognized the scale of the challenge, followed transparent communication, and took timely actions. (Otaola, 2020)

New Zealand’s prime minister spoke frankly to people and told them about the current threatening situation of the pandemic. The same policy of timely actions was also followed by Denmark’s prime minister. Other countries like Taiwan, Norway, Finland, and Iceland’s transparent and effective communication helped to keep the fatality rates low. (Ami, 2020) (Niblett & Vinjamuri, 2020). When citizen trusts those in power, they are more likely to follow the rules and behave as responsible citizens. When it comes to the United States, the country invested a lot in technology and innovation which would help them to deal with the after-effects of the pandemic better. For example, American citizens can depend on the transparency and efficiency of the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention to get reliable reports and numbers (Berengaut, 2020) . Talking about India, the country was in lockdown which continued for months. The only reason people acted as responsible citizens was because the government was true and transparent while delivering information. Everyone knew how crucial and difficult the situation was and cooperated in the best way possible. During that time, the government was working at the war level for the people while giving out legitimate information about the ongoing pandemic which helped them earn trust and execute their strategies better.

After analyzing both sides, democracies work better because they give out legitimate information and gain public trust through maintaining transparency. In such situations, making the public feel safe is very important and that can only be done when the right information is given out. Policies can’t be executed properly without public cooperation, which can only be gained when you make the citizens feel involved and safe. So, democracies handle pandemics better.

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