**Headline:** Can Democracy Survive the Coronavirus?

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**[Article Body:]**

The COVID-19 global pandemic has prompted a major question about leadership in a time of crisis: how to balance the importance of public health with the respecting of individual liberty? The virus respects no borders. It cares little for how nations are run, whether through democratic governance or authoritarianism. But democratic governments have already used the virus to crack down on freedoms, while those regimes that were authoritarian to begin with have used the pandemic to grab even more power. Meanwhile in countries like the United States, the notion of freedom is being used to undermine public health. But freedom and public health are not mutually exclusive.

Hungary’s right-wing government offers perhaps the most striking example of how a crisis of public health has been used to further authoritarianism. Prime Minister [Viktor Orban](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/03/31/coronavirus-kills-its-first-democracy/) has cited the virus spread to cancel all elections and remain in power indefinitely. He has invoked broad powers to limit air travel and individual movements. But there is no end date to the restrictions, nor any parliamentary review of his actions. For as long as Orban’s emergency orders are in place, he has claimed the right to rule by decree. Likening the virus to the sort of “foreign influence” he has railed against, Orban [said](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/03/25/hungarys-prime-minister-is-using-virus-make-an-authoritarian-power-grab/), “We are fighting a two-front war. One front is called migration, and the other one belongs to the coronavirus. There is a logical connection between the two, as both spread with movement.”

In [Serbia](https://apnews.com/dffb2fa43d0c5fddc4508f2558603e67), President Aleksandar Vucic has pushed for similarly extreme measures and relied on heavily armed police patrols to enforce his edicts. He too has undermined parliamentary oversight of his actions and assumed the right to rule by decree.

A spokesperson for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe [explained](https://apnews.com/dffb2fa43d0c5fddc4508f2558603e67) the framework for what the pandemic requires from governments: “A state of emergency—wherever it is declared and for whatever reason—must be proportionate to its aim, and only remain in place for as long as absolutely necessary.” But history is replete with examples of governments seizing power during moments of crisis and refusing to voluntarily relinquish them.

In [India](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/24/world/asia/india-coronavirus-lockdown.html), the world’s largest democracy and second most populous country, the authoritarian Hindu fundamentalist government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has imposed the strictest lockdown in the world. Announced with almost no notice, Modi upended life for more than a billion people with a mandatory 21-day lockdown to slow the spread of the coronavirus. With hundreds of millions of people surviving on a hand-to-mouth existence, many homeless or displaced, such a draconian order did more harm than good. Tens of thousands gathered into crowded buses, trains, and streets desperate to return to their villages as their source of incomes were cut off. Nearly [two dozen people have died](https://thewire.in/rights/coronavirus-national-lockdown-migrant-workers-dead) en route from Indian cities, including an 11-year-old who simply starved to death.

China, a nation whose authoritarian streak was already under international scrutiny, [expanded its surveillance power](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/facial-recognition-concerns-chinas-widespread-surveillance-200218111532668.html) under cover of the virus. Public transportation will now deploy facial recognition and temperature scanning technology to keep tabs on citizens with no oversight on how the data will be used, and no end date on data gathering.

[Israel](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/israel-is-using-cellphone-surveillance-to-warn-citizens-you-may-already-be-infected/2020/03/19/68267294-69e7-11ea-b199-3a9799c54512_story.html) has taken it a step further, openly surveilling all residents using their cell phone data to track those who have tested positive for COVID-19 and determining who has come into contact with them. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu waived parliamentary oversight on using such “[anti-terrorism](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/slope-israel-draws-flak-coronavirus-surveillance-200317153457942.html)” measures to tackle the pandemic.

In the United States, the emergence of COVID-19 initially provoked [almost no actions from the government](https://thehill.com/opinion/white-house/490404-covid-19-we-had-the-warning-but-we-lacked-the-leadership). President Donald Trump was [briefed](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/us/politics/navarro-warning-trump-coronavirus.html?action=click&module=Spotlight&pgtype=Homepage) about the devastating potential of the disease to take half a million lives in January, but he was more deeply concerned about the health of the economy than that of American lives and repeatedly claimed, “[No one saw this coming](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/03/31/everyone-everything-trump-has-blamed-his-coronavirus-response/).” Trump watched the stock market gains under his presidency unravel and prematurely urged a return to normalcy, hoping to see “[packed churches](https://apnews.com/87e9fad01d7b9ed96c83f992f429ee46)” by Easter and worrying that the “cure” for the virus would be “[worse than the problem itself.](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/us/politics/trump-coronavirus-restrictions.html)” An administration that has based its power on undermining science and courting right-wing religious fundamentalists, gun-owners, and self-avowed libertarians has used the notion of “individual freedoms” to justify its dangerous inaction.

Numerous U.S. officials are carving out [exemptions](https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/religion/news/2020/03/27/482359/religious-exemptions-coronavirus-pandemic-will-worsen-crisis/) for religious gatherings in spite of the clear need for strict quarantining to stop the spread of the disease. Jerry Falwell Jr.’s [Liberty University](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/29/us/politics/coronavirus-liberty-university-falwell.html) refused to respect quarantine recommendations and reopened after Spring Break, endangering students. The [pastor of a megachurch in Florida](https://www.thedailybeast.com/hillsborough-sheriff-to-arrest-rodney-howard-browne-megachurch-pastor-who-flouted-virus-rules) also flouted public health warnings and assembled his congregation.

Perhaps the best symbol of “libertarian” idiocy is [Ammon Bundy](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/us/coronavirus-idaho-bundy-patriot.html), the leader of the failed occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon who is leading a “liberty rebellion” in Idaho—a state that has more cases of the virus per capita than California. Bundy has even wished the illness upon himself, saying, “I want the virus now.” But he ought to consider the case of UK Prime Minister [Boris Johnson](https://fortune.com/2020/04/06/uk-boris-johnson-coronavirus-icu-herd-immunity/) who also spent weeks refusing to take action against the virus and claimed he was seeking “herd immunity” for a large percentage of the population. Johnson has now contracted the virus and sought intensive care at a hospital. Like others, he has realized an aversion to scientific facts doesn’t make you immune to the virus.

A crisis such as the one we are facing demands decisive action tempered with an abundance of caution about infringements of people’s rights. Nations such as [New Zealand](https://theconversation.com/three-reasons-why-jacinda-arderns-coronavirus-response-has-been-a-masterclass-in-crisis-leadership-135541?fbclid=IwAR3giX2SsThAS842RVRZnN0nbTRTpOseP-LqU5SNLiRerdNX7Z3hRUJ_gVA) are showing it can be done. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has acted decisively but emphasized government transparency in decision-making over a virus-lockdown. She has issued clear messages about the government’s strategy and goals for eliminating the virus’ spread and made herself available to the instruments of accountability in a democracy—namely the press. Her approach stands in contrast to the United States where President Trump has upped the ferocity of his attacks on reporters.

[South Korea](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/world/asia/coronavirus-south-korea-flatten-curve.html) also took quick action to tackle the virus after it first exploded into view. President Moon Jae-in ordered widespread testing, imposed emergency measures on the epicenter of the outbreak, and isolated and treated patients swiftly. Communicating clearly and often with the public, the government effectively turned around a public health crisis without resorting to heavy-handed or autocratic measures. Unlike the United States and UK, President Moon relied on sound scientific advice and wasted no time in ordering tests and protective equipment.

New Zealand and South Korea offer models for how governments can navigate unprecedented crises such as this. The coronavirus is not just a threat to our personal and collective health; it is a threat to our democratic institutions as well. We need to protect lives and democracies.