

Pandemic, Autocracy, and Neocracy

How a Virus Revealed the Weakness of Democracy

One should be very cautious in comparing recent pandemic policies of different countries. These policies are difficult to assess because the data are collected and published using different methods, for different objectives, and with varying degrees of accuracy. Therefore, caution is also warranted in assigning political blames to individual countries or governments. However, the available figures leave no doubt about this conclusion: the pandemic was neither a success story for Western democracies, nor was it an advertisement for the political culture of the Western world. Quite the opposite is true.

Anyone who believed in the civilizational superiority of the Western world would expect that long-established traditional democracies, such as the United States, Great Britain, and France, would distinguish themselves in pandemic control at least by low casualty figures. However, it is precisely these countries that have most blatantly failed – both politically and morally – in pandemic control. Countries such as Italy and Belgium, which would also claim to be among the world's most stable democracies, fared similarly badly by international standards, and Germany's record is not much better. Apart from exceptional cases such as Finland, the results for the other European democracies are also sobering or even devastating. The same applies to almost all of Latin America. In all these countries, the pandemic policy was improvised and erratic and also erratically communicated, often shaped by economic interests and by prejudices of political parties. It is, therefore, not surprising that in all these countries, between one and three per thousand

of the population fell victim to the pandemic by spring 2021 alone. Very few democracies in the Western world, including the island states of Iceland, Australia, and New Zealand, have been undeniably successful in combating the pandemic. It is all the more remarkable, though, that the democratic island states of Great Britain and Ireland were among the worst hit by the pandemic worldwide.

The Asian world has been incomparably more successful in fighting the pandemic. This is particularly true of autocratic regimes such as China and Vietnam, it is true of countries such as Thailand, and it is true of democratic states such as Taiwan, South Korea and, to a lesser extent, Japan, although the latter three – de facto also South Korea – were also favored in pandemic control by their insularity.

False justifications

This diverse data situation contradicts the simple and convenient but ultimately untenable explanations repeatedly presented in the Western world. It is untenable that a successful pandemic control as demonstrated by China can only succeed in a strictly autocratic regime. It is also untenable that specific Asian cultural backgrounds and manners are prerequisites for successful pandemic control. It is equally false that this can only be achieved in insular states.

On the other hand, one should not be tempted by statistics to forget about common sense. Of course, autocratic regimes can enforce policy-compliant rules of conduct more easily than liberal democracies, and of course, the less such rules clash with local tradition and culture, the more likely they are to succeed. And, of course, insular states can comparatively easily insulate themselves from a pandemic raging in the outside world. It is absurd to deny such causalities or to try to refute them with statistics. Nevertheless, one thing cannot be explained or even excused by all of this: The failure of almost the entire Western democratic world in effectively fighting the pandemic.

In the end, one of the most irritating findings will be that in the course of its pandemic policy, even autocratic China will not only have inflicted far lesser losses in prosperity and well-being on its population but also much shorter – and overall less burdensome – curtailments of fundamental rights than almost all Western democracies. One must therefore ask whether the failure of Western pandemic policy was not a systemic failure of modern democracy and – insofar as modern democracy is an outcome of it – of Western culture and ideology.

One should beware of a hasty judgment on this, but the evidence to date appears overwhelming. At the latest in a comprehensive retrospective, it will become clear to what extent the pandemic policy of Western democracies lacked political foresight, moral orientation, and economic competence. In such a retrospective, it will be asked whether the political decisions taken could have been justified even if their consequences had been realistically assessed in advance; if, thus, it had been made clear at an early stage that, resulting from these policies, during the first year and a half of the pandemic

- up to three per thousand or more of the population will die,
- cultural life will come to a virtual standstill,
- schools, universities, and other educational institutions will be closed or be maintained only in an emergency mode,
- social contacts will be radically restricted, with devastating psychological consequences for many, especially for children, the elderly, the poor, the sick, and the disabled,
- retail trade, aviation, catering, hotels, leisure industries, and other personal services will be largely shut down

and if, at the same time, it had been acknowledged that – as demonstrated by other countries – all of this could, for the most part, be avoided by a different, from the outset more consistent policy.

Of course, even such a more consistent policy would not have been free of unwelcome side effects. Temporarily, any truly consistent policy would have imposed even stronger restrictions on citizens. It would have restricted freedoms such as freedom to travel, freedom of assembly, and freedom of trade, as well as data protection more severely than most politicians in Western democracies have dared to do.

Such alternatives were, of course, not completely ignored in Western political debates, but this had little influence on political decisions. The short-term restrictions to be imposed were not carefully balanced against the related longer-term saving of human lives, culture, education, welfare, and prosperity.

One reason for this was that the human lives at risk and, even more so, the losses in culture, education, mental health, and economic prosperity were difficult to quantify in advance. The fact that the debate was largely conducted with taboo terms such as fundamental rights and democratic legitimacy also played an important role. In parts of the Western world, these terms had acquired a nimbus which made rational evaluations of restrictions in this regard extremely touchy. Thus, for example, the argument that any restrictions on fundamental rights, however short and small, require legitimation by parliamentary resolution was difficult to rebut in the public discourse. The question of whether the parliamentary processes might be too slow and members of parliament generally overburdened with these issues was not – or at best with the greatest reluctance – discussed.

Does the pandemic policy stand for a system failure?

All this has ultimately resulted in most democratic countries lacking long-term foresight in pandemic policy. They pursued a short-sighted policy in which much greater weight was attached to privations imposed in the short term than to comparable privations imposed in a longer term. For example, if the alternatives were an immediate short and severe lockdown vs. a much longer and thus much more painful one a few months or weeks later, the latter was mostly chosen. This resulted in

multiplying both the number of victims and the loss of quality of life and prosperity. With such policy choices, Western democracies fell far short of what was achievable, and they thereby failed both morally and economically. This failure can be explained in part by ideological and cultural conditioning, but it is also and chiefly an institutional failure. It is a systemic failure of conventional democracy.

This did not really come as a surprise. For decades before the pandemic, democratic institutions had been losing credibility and trust, as evidenced e.g. by general disenchantment with politics, dwindling voter turnout, and gains by populist and other protest parties. Many democratic states, therefore, entered the pandemic with a protracted credibility problem and correspondingly low moral authority. The lower the moral authority of governments, however, the more difficult it is for citizens to be convinced of the need for temporary painful restrictions, and the less willing citizens are to fully comply with such restrictions. Thus, even to the extent that democratic governments made the right decisions in pandemic policy, they failed to fully achieve the intended changes in behavior and thus the desired containment of the infections. This, in turn, made many citizens feel all the more vindicated in their disenchantment with politics and democracy.

But democratic pandemic policies have, of course, failed not only due to a lack of authority on the part of governments. Their failure has been primarily due to professional incompetence and a lack of long-term thinking, resulting in ineffective, inconsistent, or at least delayed decisions. This incompetence and shortsightedness of democratic pandemic policy was too widespread to be explained by unfortunate circumstances or individual errors. The more plausible explanation is a democracy-specific institutional failure.

It is equally plausible, then, to interpret China's success in pandemic policy as an autocracy-specific institutional success. This would suggest that, at least in pandemic policy, political expertise can be applied more easily and successfully in a form of government such as China's than in

Western democracies. If this is the case, then in future, possibly even more threatening pandemics citizens in democratic states will be far less well protected than in China and other autocracies. This, in turn, gives rise to fears that in future pandemics, democracy itself may be at stake.

It would not have taken much for this scenario to come true already in the current pandemic. This was prevented only by two fortunate coincidences. The first of these coincidences was that in the years leading up to the pandemic, conditions had been created for a broad-based use of teleworking and homeschooling. Thereby, the world was spared an incomparably more dramatic economic and educational crisis.

The second coincidence, far more significant for political stability, was the unexpectedly rapid development of new vaccines. If, as initially expected by experts, effective corona vaccines had become available only years later and the ineffective pandemic policies had been carried on for so long, the reputation of democracy could have been harmed irreparably. Thus, it is primarily thanks to the vaccine developers if Western understanding of politics, Western democracy, and the Western way of life emerge from this pandemic more or less unscathed and China's rise to global dominance is not further accelerated.

There is a very convenient answer to the question of why most Western democracies took the successful pandemic policy of Asian autocracies with almost stoic composure: They simply took their own comparative failure as the price citizens have to pay for living in more liberal conditions. They assumed that citizens only had a choice between a liberal, but in existential matters comparatively ineffective democracy and a more effective, but illiberal repressive autocracy. In this view, if in a democracy it is harder for specialized expertise to prevail over complex political problems, this must willy-nilly be accepted.

For the most part, public discourse in the Western world has been content with precisely this simple answer. For greater efficiency in combating the pandemic, it was believed, no democratic achievements should be sacrificed and the established state order should by no means be

questioned. Only minor details of the state order were in some countries critically discussed from the pandemic perspective, for example in Germany the stifling muddle of responsibilities shared among municipalities, states, and the federal government – and there again among the executive and the legislature. However, the debate has not opened up to the question of whether pandemic policy might reveal an elementary flaw in democratic state orders.

The Way Out of Systemic Overload: From Democracy to Neocracy

In the pandemic, a small minority of countries showed the rest of the world that a better pandemic policy was possible. Thus, there was no worldwide lack of specialized expertise. This expertise existed, but it could not assert itself in the political processes of the vast majority of democracies.

On closer inspection, this is hardly surprising. The necessary policy expertise was available, but it was limited to an extremely small group of individuals. One of the reasons for this was that there was no genuine scientific specialization in pandemic policy. As a result, large numbers of, among others, virologists were drawn into the role of pandemic policy experts. However, even the highest level of virological expertise is not in itself expertise in pandemic policy. Such expertise can only arise from – in addition to moral sensitivity – a rare combination of scientific, medical, and political expertise. In the present pandemic, this was all the harder to develop as in some respects, this pandemic was the first of its kind.

As a result, an infinitely small number of real experts faced a virtually infinite number of non-specialized, i.e. lay political decision-makers – such as members of parliament, ministers, prime ministers, district councils, and mayors. If, as recently in Germany, at least one of these decision-makers in a country had relevant expertise in pandemic policy, this had to be considered a stroke of luck.

Such a confrontation between very few real specialists and very many non-specialized political decision-makers also exists, of course – at least in theory – in an autocratic state such as China. Nevertheless, the institutional structures in China made it easier for specialized expertise to assert itself in policy-making processes. This is a historical fact, regardless of the specific institutional features. It is also a fact that democratic institutions have been much less effective in protecting their citizens from pertinent existential threats.

This alone would not justify questioning the existing democracy as such if the Covid 19 pandemic were a singular case and the democratic failure in this pandemic were therefore equally singular. But there can be no question of that. On the contrary, this pandemic is likely to prove an exemplary challenge for future politics in many respects. Future policy will not only have to deal with further pandemics but increasingly with comparably threatening and complex problems confronting the specialized expertise of a very few with an overwhelming number of lay political decision-makers. As a result, the question of how to give the rare, highly specialized expertise the necessary weight in political decision-making processes will become ever more urgent.

It would be a tragic turn of history if the solution to this challenge lay in authoritarian structures as in China. But this is, if for no other reason, highly unlikely because China's political institutions were, of course, not created to deal with such new and complex challenges. China's current state order is the product of a 19th-century ideology, and as such, it cannot be an answer to novel challenges of the 21st century. If this old authoritarian order offered relatively favorable preconditions for dealing with the present pandemic, this cannot be attributed to the genius of ideologues and state founders of past centuries. It is just a coincidence.

One should not, therefore, hope to find adequate recipes against overburdening of policymakers in authoritarian regimes. Rather, the challenge is to create new political institutions that are at least as liberal as the traditional democratic ones, but at the same time bring specialized

expertise to bear at least as effectively as recently in China's or Vietnam's pandemic policy. Such new institutions can be based no more on the old Western model of democracy than on authoritarian models. Rather, in this century, the need arises for new state orders that are designed from the outset to cope with such highly complex and fundamental challenges as the Covid 19 pandemic or the global climate crisis.

State orders that meet precisely this requirement – that are, thus, designed to bring highly specialized expertise to bear politically in the best possible way in a liberal context by democratic procedures – are the so-called neocratic ones. The neocracy concept¹ provides the construction manual for this. It provides a basic model in which no political decision-makers would be responsible for the entirety of politics, voting on political decisions in all policy branches. This basic neocratic model allows for a large variety of new forms of government to be designed, all of which would effectively prevent the overburdening and the resulting incompetence of political decision-makers through institutional design alone. Beyond this prevention of political incompetence, the neocracy concept also opens up new dimensions of freedom and self-determination withheld in conventional democracy.

The certainty of being politically well protected against future pandemics and comparable threats is, therefore, no more distant – but also no closer – than a new, neocratic state order.

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¹ For English language publications on the neocracy concept, see B. Wehner, *Freedom, Peace and Secession, New Dimensions of Democracy*, Springer 2020, and B. Wehner, *Universal Basic Income and the Reshaping of Democracy*, Springer 2018.