GLOBAL DEMOCRACY & COVID-19:

UPGRADING INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

CONTENTS

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SUMMARY

This report assesses the impact that Covid-19 is having on democracy around the world.

It examines how international democracy support organisations and donors are responding to the challenges related to the pandemic and calls for a stronger and reformulated international democracy support both now and into the longer-term future. Rather than getting immersed in inconclusive debates about which kind of political system is set to deal best with Covid-19, the report calls for a more practical policy effort to ensure that democratic norms are defended and work in a way that is tightly relevant to the pandemic. While democratic systems may have several potential advantages in fighting pandemics and their aftermath, these need to be proactively fostered. The report demonstrates that the pandemic is having distinctive political implications across different types of regime. Policy responses need to be tailored to these contrasting outcomes and risks in the way they seek to advance and uphold democratic rights.

Aligning with the recent 'Call to Defend Democracy' and based on an assessment of crisis-related democratic trends, the report offers five concrete recommendations for how governments and international organisations concerned with supporting democracy globally should respond to the Covid-19 crisis. It advocates: a global monitoring of Covid-19 related democratic infringements; new ways of including democracy efforts into Covid-19 emergency and recovery aid; an enhanced support of democratic civic activism that has emerged during the pandemic; a new multilateral initiative to learn lessons from how democracies have coped with the crisis; and an effort to explore the growth in new types of democratic practice that have proliferated under Covid-19. Through these recommendations, the report offers guidance to democracy organisations and donors as they endeavour to keep democracy on the international agenda during the global health crisis, as well as for civil society organisations adjusting their strategies to the altered context. These issues are also of broader relevance to governments and citizens around the world given the challenge of sustaining Covid-19 measures over the longer-term that do not trample on basic democratic practices.
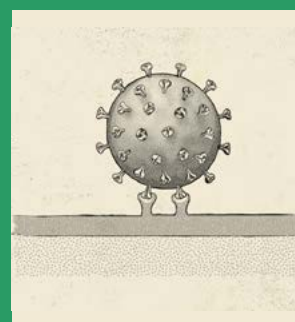
INTRODUCTION

While Covid-19's tragic death toll[1] is above any political considerations, the pandemic also poses a serious challenge to democracy.

In an effort to contain the virus governments across the world have enacted diverse emergency powers to enforce lockdowns and other measures. **While in many cases these restrictive measures were proportionate and justified for the imperative of protecting lives, some governments have used them disingenuously to restrict democratic activities and silence critical voices.** Emergency measures are not inherently undemocratic, but in many places have undercut civil liberties. Some weak democracies and autocracies have suffered a particularly serious lurch towards more centralised power and repression with probable long-term ramifications. Even if new risks to democracy are not present in all countries, they are pervasive enough to be of serious concern.

If Covid-19 has in some places triggered anti-democratic restrictions and repression, it has also incentivised innovative pro-democratic efforts and initiatives. The stirrings of a greater concern for democratic protection can be witnessed in some countries. The pandemic sharpens the need to defend democracy, yet also presents some promising new access points for domestic and international actors

committed to doing so. The radically altered political environment calls on international organisations not only to recommit to defending democracy but also to adjust their strategies. The pandemic experience reinforces the generic requirements for more effective democracy support; but it also presents new and very specific policy challenges that will require deeper change on the part of those concerned with upholding democratic norms.

A recent 'Call to Defend Democracy' was signed by almost 100 organizations from all over the world, as well as nearly 500 prominent individuals from 119 countries, including 13 Nobel Laureates and 62 former Heads of State or Government.[2] Adding operational ideas to this, the report offers five core policy recommendations that reflect the altered context for democracy support. It calls for a comprehensive monitoring mechanism to help guide international responses to Covid-19 democratic infringements; commitments to incorporate democracy efforts into Covid-19 emergency and recovery aid; a programme to support the new democratic civic activism that the pandemic has prompted; more action-oriented and genuinely multilateral cooperation for safeguarding democratic practices; and an effort to harness emergent innovations in democratic participation, electoral practices, political-party organisation and institutional oversight.

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DEMOCRACY IN THE PANDEMIC
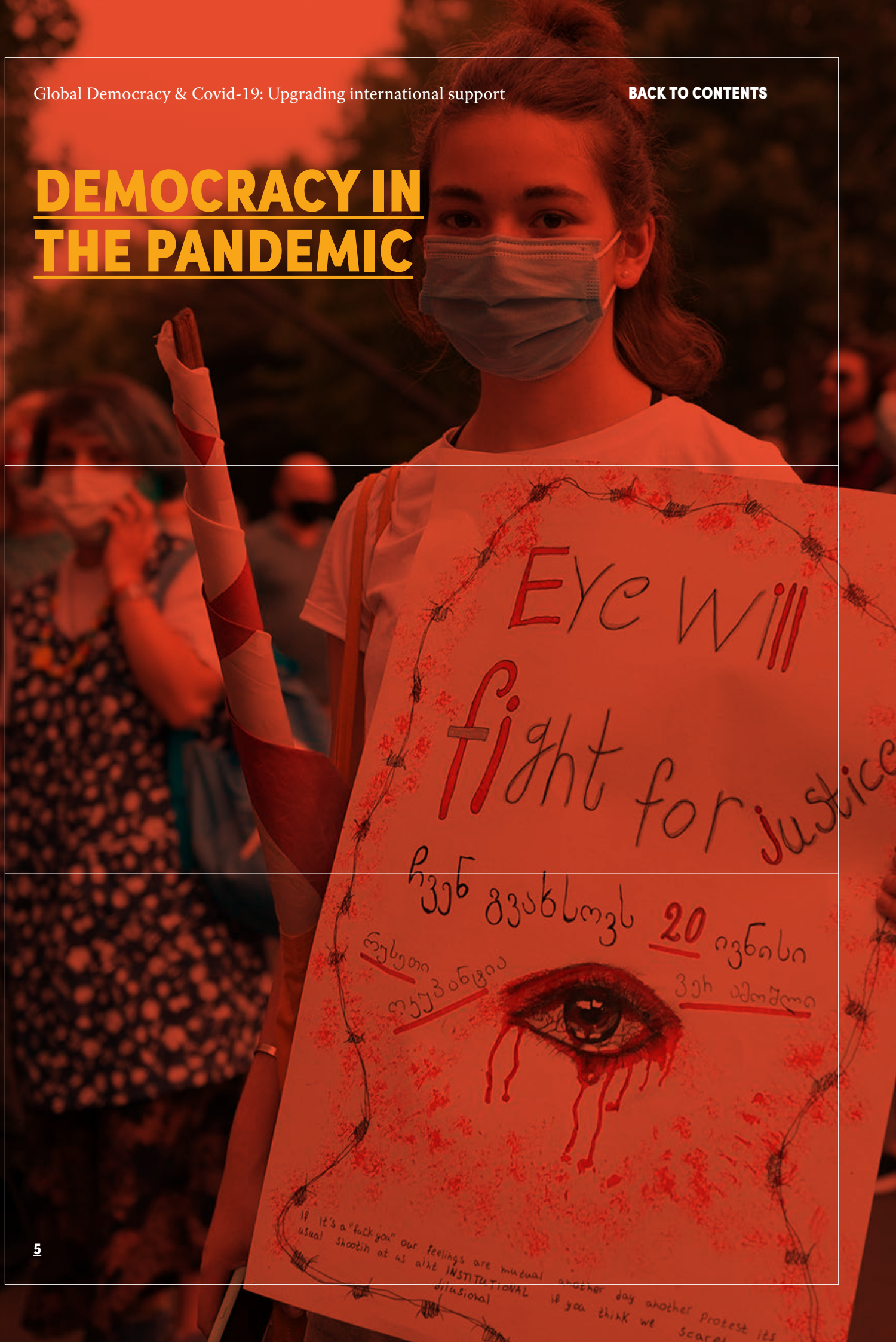
DEMOCRACY IN THE PANDEMIC

There has been much debate about which type of political system has dealt best with the Covid-19 health emergency.

Several democracies and authoritarian regimes have suffered especially deadly outbreaks; conversely, a number of both democratic countries and autocracies have kept death rates low. So many different variables are at play that it is extremely difficult to isolate the impact of political regime-type. Countries are at different stages of the pandemic and there is no common method in the reporting of official figures. At this point, it is difficult to proffer definitive judgements over the impact of different types of politics on Covid-19 responses. However, it is useful to look at more specific aspects of different governance and political systems that support or harm effective crisis management.

Some correlations reveal relatively low levels of fatalities in countries with stronger civic capacities and low levels of corruption.[3] And it is widely agreed that the relatively imprecise measure of governance capacity has been a factor in effective crisis management.[4] Still, political regime type alone does not appear to have

been a primary determinant of governments' effectiveness. Rather than only focusing on a 'democracy versus authoritarian' discussion, the practical approach in the immediate future will be to ensure democratic politics function more effectively to assist Covid-19's long-term containment and that emergency responses do not generate further democratic regression.

Some of democracy's advantages may come to the fore as countries move into the latter phases of Covid-19. Previous pandemics suggest that citizens are more likely to comply with health measures over the longer-term where they feel they have a voice over government decisions.[5] Trust within communities and towards governments[6] is a key feature that underpins effective public policies; while not unique to democracies, such trust can be more easily thickened through bottom-up inclusion and pluralism. Unhindered access to information is

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more likely to ensure government cover-ups do not cost lives. Legislative oversight and open debate are more likely to keep effective pressure on governments in the long post-pandemic recovery phase.[7] In democracies, citizens will be able to vote against governments that have performed badly in the crisis; electoral accountability should give leaders more incentive to enact good policies. It has been widely noted that women leaders in democratic countries have performed well during the crisis. To the extent that democracies provide stronger gender-rights protection, this is also likely to be advantageous to health indicators over the longer term.

The economic and social impact of Covid-19 will place a strain on all types of political systems; yet democracies can gain a wider buy-in to difficult economic and fiscal measures to the extent that policies result from open debate over different options. Democracies can show a more inclusive, fairer and open way of dealing with the challenges that the pandemic's long-tail will present. They are also more inclined to show more international solidarity and cooperation in times of crisis.

Over time, democracies tend to suffer fewer deaths from epidemics[8] and score better on health and human development indicators.[9] Perhaps the crucial policy-relevant point in autocracy-democracy comparisons is this: while these kinds of democratic advantages are often asserted, they cannot be taken for granted. It is unlikely that they will manifest themselves automatically; rather the benefits of open politics and societal trust need to be carefully curated through tailored and purposive policies, marked by a strong social contract between public and state.

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UNPACKING THE THREATS TO DEMOCRACY

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Many emergency restrictions have been necessary, and governments may still remove them if and when the immediate crisis abates.

Most democracies have kept emergency measures largely within constitutional limits and have kept parliaments open. Data suggest that those countries already suffering democratic repression have been at higher risk of further repression due to Covid-19.[10] Yet, some more general trends clearly do not auger well. While many emergency measures are fully justified, several aspects are not.

A key dividing line is where regimes have used emergency provisions in ways unrelated to the health emergency – and that undercut constitutional principles on freedom of expression, good electoral practice, formal institutional checks-and-balances, non-discrimination and media independence. The following areas are of particular worry:

Excessive violence by security forces

Security forces have in many countries seized an outsized role in the pandemic, clearly beyond what is needed to enforce emergency measures. The Philippine government's pandemic response has

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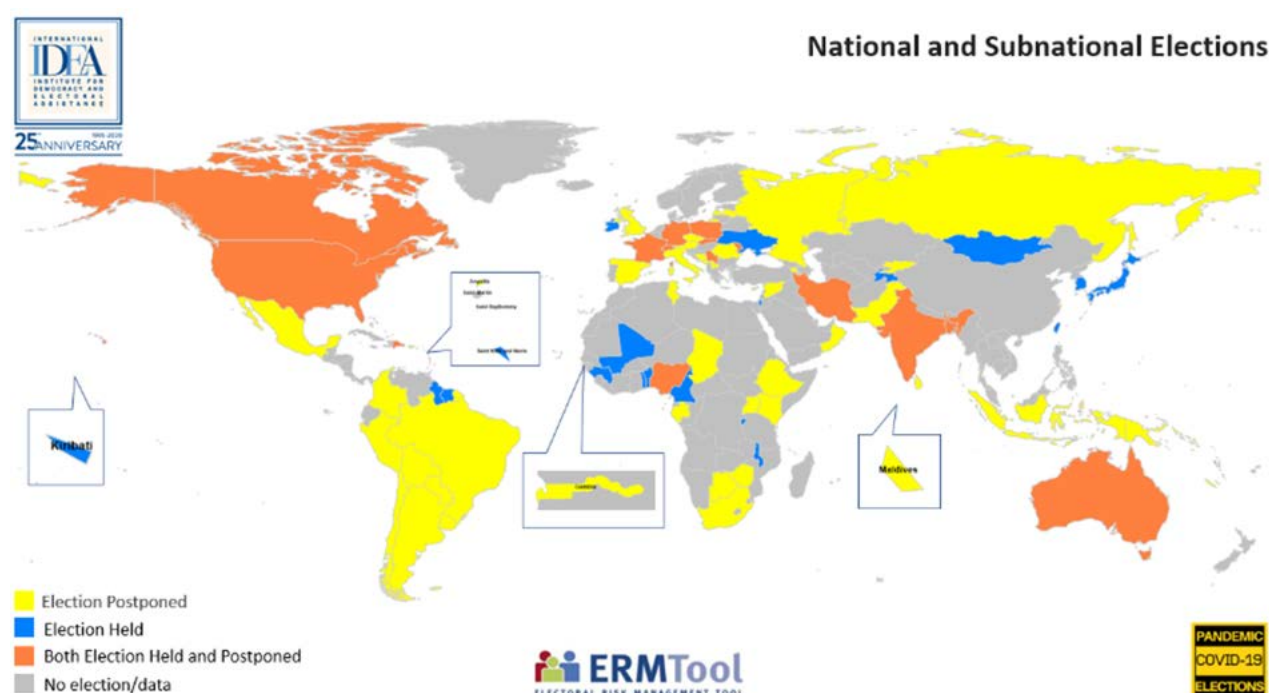
been highly militarised, with security forces detaining thousands of people for violating curfew and killing many citizens.[11] **As one activist in Tunisia reports, the government there has approached the crisis through a 'security lens'.** In Africa, excessive police brutality has been reported in South Africa, Uganda and Kenya, where more people have died at the hands of security forces in 2020 than from Covid-19.[12] Militaries have gained a prominent role in Covid-management across Latin America. Deadly interventions from security forces to revolts in prisons have been witnessed in Iran and Nigeria.[13] These trends have wide and disturbing political implications. [14]

Interrupted elections and electoral integrity challenges

To date, 106 elections have been postponed in 61 countries.[15] In many cases the adjustments to election timing and voting arrangements have been a necessary and justifiable part of the Covid-19 responses and have respected constitutional provisions and legality. However, decisions about holding elections often become deeply politicised and polarising. Some elections held after the virus' outbreak suffered from extremely low turnout and many primaries have also been significantly affected.[16] There are in many cases dangers in leaders putting off elections for too long in order to prevent challenges to their own incumbency. Ethiopia is an example of where postponement may

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Map generated using International IDEA's Electoral Risk Management Tool, 24 June 2020

National and Subnational Elections

- Election Postponed
- Election Held
- Both Election Held and Postponed
- No election/data

have been justified but uncertainty has been created because no date has been given for when the rearranged election will be held.

In other cases, the concern is more about regimes trying to force through votes or plebiscites in lockdown conditions that make it easier for them to manipulate voting processes - Russia is an example of such an attempt.[17] In Niger, faked announcements have been used to disrupt electoral processes.[18] Even where governments are genuinely trying to find ways to keep to electoral timetables, special voting arrangements and election related disinformation are in places introducing problems and vulnerabilities for some groups. Other concerns have arisen such as Covid-19's distorted impact on political campaigning, doubts over the capacity and preparedness of electoral bodies, and the new difficulties of ensuring international observation.[19] Across the world governments will be taking decisions over holding or postponing elections that need to be based on stronger political consensus and trust in decision-making process.

Opportunistic clampdowns on political opponents

Many leaders have used Covid-19 as a pretext for curtailing parliamentary oversight and tightening the pressure on political opposition. While public attention is drawn to the health crisis, authoritarian leaders have launched new assaults against opposition groups.[20] The Chinese assault on Hong Kong democracy activists is the most serious case of this but far from being

the only acutely worrying instance. Many governments have detained not only opposition activists and journalists but healthcare workers who dared to criticise official responses to the coronavirus. In Russia several frontline doctors strangely fell from hospital windows after making critical statements about the country's crisis response.[21] In Thailand, Cambodia, Venezuela and Bangladesh extreme pressure and detentions have been meted out against political opponents.[22] In Bolivia, authorities used the pandemic as a justification to threaten political opponents with up to ten years in prison.[23] Throughout the Balkans governments have launched crackdowns on political opponents and media outlets.[24] Regimes in Iraq, Algeria and Lebanon have detained democracy activists with little health-related justification. Turkish authorities have extended repressive measures on political and civic opposition in parallel to managing the health crisis.[25] Kazakhstan's measures against peaceful assembly represent a serious breach of international human rights standards. [26]

Censorship and threats to independent media

Many governments have passed decrees that allow governments to fine or imprison those deemed to be spreading 'fake news' critical of official management of the pandemic. This has happened in Bolivia, Bangladesh, Russia and Vietnam, for example. Press freedom has been more widely curtailed in Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, Montenegro, Serbia and Sierra Leone, amongst many other states. One of the last countries

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in the world to acknowledge an outbreak of the virus, Tajikistan blocked a website reporting fatality figures different to government official figures.[27] In the Philippines the operations of the country's largest broadcasting network have been halted.[28] In Cambodia, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, Turkey, and Venezuela, journalists and others have been arrested and detained simply for reporting the virus.[29] Egypt and China have expelled foreign journalists.[30] The broader pandemic context has posed wider and unprecedented challenges to the functioning of independent media across the world. A number of media outlets have suffered significant revenue falls.[31] In the Western Balkans, even successful media operators are experiencing serious financial challenges.[32] The altered pandemic context has posed an existential threat to media.

Increased disinformation

There are many examples of state-backed influence operations linked to the pandemic. Malign disinformation campaigns have come particularly from Russia, Iran and China. The disinformation stories have attempted to blame the West for the coronavirus outbreak and emphasised its inability to tackle the crisis.[33] These three countries' digital narratives look increasingly similar to one another.[34] Disinformation stories have expressly attempted to instrumentalise the health crisis and serve a general goal of undermining public trust in democratic countries.[35] More broadly, governments' disinformation has deliberately fostered rivalries

between ethnic[36] and religious groups by accusing some sections of the population of being responsible for the virus.[37] Some disinformation stories about health measures have directly put lives in danger.

Misuse of digital surveillance

The global health crisis has demonstrated the positive role of technology in terms of spreading preventive messages and increasing public access to health care; in many democracies, governments have built in concerns over privacy rights to their tracking apps. **However, various governments across the world have misused technology for unlawful surveillance.[38]** China, Iran and Russia's digital surveillance measures have been especially intrusive of individuals' right to privacy, freedom of expression and association.[39] Many countries have used tracing apps without anonymisation. Ecuador implemented GPS tracking to enforce quarantine measures and the Israeli government authorised security services to use a system initially designed for counterterrorism operations. In South Korea, authorities spread advisory messages which contained personal details of infected patients. These measures have raised concerns not solely over breaches of medical privacy but of broader human rights violations.[40]

Minority rights and vulnerable groups

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The Indian government has targeted Muslim communities. In some countries, sexual minorities have been subject to further abuses. Pandemic responses have made refugees and asylum seekers even more vulnerable. In addition to the suspension of asylum applications, those living in refugee camps have been the target of discriminatory policies.[41] Several EU and Arab governments have introduced restrictions that discriminately target Syrian refugees. Governments are largely disingenuous in justifying all these various measures on health grounds. Lockdowns have resulted in a dramatic increase in cases of gender-based violence depriving women the basic human right to live free from violence.[42] In France, Cyprus, Singapore, Argentina, Canada, Germany, Spain, the UK and the US the number of registered cases, emergency calls and demand for emergency shelter have increased by varying but significant degrees.[43] Confinement further limits access to education for children and students across the world. Digital learning has particularly challenged the most vulnerable and disadvantaged communities, which due to the lack of necessary facilities and infrastructure have not benefitted from national or global efforts aimed at sustaining education during the crisis. The pandemic further worsened conditions of migrant workers across the world. [44] It has likewise affected people with disabilities, narrowing their options for access to healthcare, education, political participation, the digital environment and work force.

Technocratic governance

A more second-order issue is that **scientific committees are wielding significant influence and generating a more technocratic style of governance.** Ironically, this science-based approach may be undermining illiberal-populists, but it brings its own problems for democratic accountability and transparency.[45] Experts in the Lancet observe that at present, governments are not learning the lessons of previous pandemics to the extent that they are taking a top-down, paternalistic approach that actually undercuts the kind of local participation that has helped provide more robust strategies in previous medical crises.[46]

Public sector corruption

The enactment of emergency powers that bypass accountability and oversight procedures dramatically increase the risks of corruption.[47] Health sectors have become especially vulnerable to corruption due to simplified procurement rules. In countries like Russia, Colombia, Argentina, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Bangladesh major corruption cases have been reported related to medical supplies.[48] Bolivia's health minister and Sicily's coronavirus emergency coordinator were arrested on pandemic related corruption cases. Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu was able to push back his planned hearing for corruption charges, clearly unrelated to the health emergency.[49] Access Now has charted a significant increase in problems over corruption

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under emergency procurement procedures.[50] This corruption has increasingly extended beyond the health sector to other spheres of public procurement due to a lack of oversight on economic policies and financial bailouts. The regulation of political party campaign finances has suffered, adding further doubts to the fairness of electoral processes.[51] In the longer-term this rise in corruption is likely to eat away at public trust in democratic processes and institutional legitimacy.

Overall, it can be concluded that Covid-19's political impacts differ across regime types.[52] While democracies and autocracies have mostly imposed similar kinds of emergency measures, countries' respective emergency measures have very different implications for politics.[53] In those countries that enjoy reasonably high-quality democracy, restrictive measures are of real concern, yet they are mostly respectful of constitutional limits, have parliamentary backing and do not override most core freedoms. In more hybrid systems or fragile democracies, the concerns are greater; even where emergency restrictions are not overly draconian the virus is straining institutions and pluralism. In restrictive regimes, governments are using the pandemic further to limit political space and deepen already existing trends. Illiberal-populist politicians in both autocracies and democracies have performed badly, not only refusing to take factual evidence seriously but also using the emergency to nourish nationalist narratives.

DEMOCRATIC PUSHBACK

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While the pandemic has unleashed this panoply of concerns, not all trends are negative.

Alongside the range of anti-democratic steps, there are signs of stronger democratic resolve across the world. This can be seen at several different levels and in varied ways:

Civil society efforts for democracy

The pandemic has had both positive and negative effects on global civic activism. Although civil society across the world has faced rigid restrictions, the adaptive experience of finding new ways to mobilise is helping them circumvent some of these new obstacles. Finding new ways to undertake both online and offline campaigns, civil society in Russia, Chile, Poland and Israel has managed to voice concerns either regarding pandemic responses or over political restrictions.[54] The very real threat of Covid-19 emergency measures has spurred civil society organisations into launching campaigns monitoring governments' rights abuses during the health emergency – good examples of this can be found in Argentina, Nigeria and Zimbabwe as well as across the Western Balkans.[55]

Through new civic practices, in many countries civil society actors have provided support to the most vulnerable parts of society. Mutual aid initiatives have multiplied aimed at complementing state capacity by helping provide medical supplies or food, assisting vulnerable members of local communities and running social support schemes. Volunteerism has expanded in relatively open contexts like Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia, Tunisia and South Africa but also in more restrictive environments like Iran. Especially influential local neighbourhood committees have formed in Sudan. In addition to these new initiatives, many long-existing and more traditional NGOs have redirected their activities towards the emergency and gained a new lease of life by doing this.[56] This has been the case, again, in relatively open cases like Brazil, India and Kenya as well as the most difficult contexts like Syria. In countries like Portugal and Malaysia civic groups have got governments to offer stronger protection for migrants' rights.

Pushback against disinformation

As the very real damage done by disinformation has become all the more tragically apparent, so civic initiatives and CSOs have expanded and multiplied against it and are playing an important role on the

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ground in providing credible and trustworthy information. **The rising wave of disinformation about the pandemic has induced diverse national and global efforts to fight misinformation**. Reflecting demand for trustworthy information about the virus, the World Health Organisation launched the Information Network for Epidemics (EPI-WIN) through which technical and social media specialists swiftly respond to misleading narratives and rumours and offer citizens evidence-based information. Around 60 locally based UN information centres play a crucial role in spreading the information in local languages.[57] The EU has notably stepped up its multiple misinformation initiatives. The EU has launched a new strategy to reinforce resilience for countering disinformation including through deeper international cooperation.[58] UNESCO is monitoring the pandemic's impact on media freedom, access to information and the safety of journalists; has established a 'resource centre' on these challenges; and has an initiative on debunking misinformation.[59]

Political opposition gathers steam

Opposition to many governments has sharpened. Political opposition parties in many parliaments have stepped up to provide detailed and forensic scrutiny of government measures, showing the importance of parliamentary oversight for good quality democratic accountability. Parliamentary committees have in some instances set up enquiries into the impact of the crisis on

democratic rights, calling witnesses and questioning ministers even as full legislative sessions are in abeyance. In some countries, citizens and civic groups have found ways to mobilise against governments' overly lax response to Covid-19; this pressure has often widened to focus on more general political grievances – in Egypt, Thailand and some European countries, for example. If governments have sought to instrumentalise the crisis for their own ends so have political opposition forces. Many of them are using government Covid-19 mismanagement as a wedge to develop renewed engagement on democracy.

New types of democratic process

A large number of online democratic forums have sprung up. These include initiatives linking citizens into online parliamentary debates. Legislative bodies in Albania, Colombia, Brazil, and the Maldives changed parliamentary rules to allow remote digital working. Chile and Singapore passed constitutional amendments specifically to allow for virtual parliamentary debates.[60] Some countries like Armenia, Guatemala, Indonesia and Kosovo have brought in social media tools better to connect with citizens.[61] In Mexico, a women's caucus has engaged in virtual meetings to protect women's rights.[62] Many countries have been looking at how to extend online voting for public and parliamentary votes, while addressing digital vulnerabilities to make these practices more fully secure.[63]

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With the pandemic's impact set to endure considerable time, more countries have begun to introduce formal legal changes to allow for digital debates and votes. Most climate citizen assemblies have moved online. All this has added some dynamism to institutional oversight and civic participation as cornerstones of good governance.

New protest activity

Online 'protests' have spread. The new reality has forced civic activists and political opposition to look for innovative ways to raise concerns. Online revolts went viral in China following the death of doctor Li Wenliang, punished by the Chinese police for warning about the coronavirus.[64] In Russia civic activists used the digital space to tag themselves in front of government buildings. In many European countries, climate change protests have held digital protests calling on world leaders not to neglect action against global warming. In Lebanon, hundreds of demonstrators protested in their cars in an ongoing series of grievances against the government. While online protests cannot be a substitute for traditional street rallies, in the pandemic this innovative approach to freedom of expression has proven a viable option for articulating citizen discontent.

A different type of opposition protest

> **'The pandemic does not push global politics in any clear or pre-determined direction; it does intensify the struggles that already exist between democratic and anti-democratic forces.'**

is more complex and challenging for democracy. In a growing number of countries more or less organised groups have mobilised against lockdowns. Many of these use a democracy narrative yet have been pushed by rightist groups whose commitment to democracy is not especially strong; the fierce libertarianism at the heart of these sporadic protests is arguably a threat to public health and not necessarily conducive to stable democracy. Rather, it risks generating deeper polarisation that could be damaging to democracy in many places.

In general, autocracies are likely to be subject to popular pressure just as much as democracies, as citizens feel anger at deaths, Covid-19 mismanagement and economic hardship; this could lead to tightening repression or to more democratic momentum. In hybrid regimes, democratic decay could easily set in or Covid-19 problems could spark popular pressure for more consolidated transitions. In states that were already classified as weak democracies, democratic erosion and mobilisation against this are likely to co-exist. Data suggest that those democracies that have performed well are those that have high levels of social trust and civic empowerment relative to those democracies that have performed badly.[65] The pandemic does not push global politics in any clear or pre-determined direction; it does intensify the struggles that already exist between democratic and anti-democratic forces.

DEMOCRACY SUPPORT IN THE PANDEMIC & BEYOND

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The global political context is changing in important and complex ways as a result of Covid-19. These changes bring acute and long-term dangers for democracy; in some ways they also open up new avenues of democratic action. International democracy support will be more important; in the changed context, it will also need to adjust. Yet, at present democracy support risks losing priority amid the pandemic.

A thorough understanding of the impacts of the pandemic is necessary for democracy support organisations to adjust their strategies and areas of interventions. To ensure democratic governance in the pandemic and post-pandemic circumstances, countries will need to develop innovative approaches for holding elections, ensure the effective functioning of democratic institutions, improve parliamentary oversight of executives and increase citizens' participation in political processes.

International emergency responses

Covid-19 has altered the governments' external priorities across the world and resulted in re-orientation of the existing resources. Donors have prioritised health challenges more clearly: the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)

has given more than 1 billion dollars for the fight against Covid-19 and relief, [66] while the European Commission has released 20 billion euros to deliver support to countries in Africa, Eastern Partnership and Western Balkans countries, the Middle East and North Africa, parts of Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean.[67] The World Bank Group has launched its largest and fastest crisis response ever, reaching over a hundred developing countries.[68] Through emergency financing, the International Monetary Fund has also provided support to around a hundred countries.[69]

The health emergency and socio-economic ramifications of the pandemic have naturally become a priority for donors. Democracy support has not yet attracted such priority attention. Formally, however, the need for revised approaches aimed at ensuring democratic governance and human rights protection also appears in governmental and international organisations' agendas. Donors have in particular begun to see information transparency, e-governance, parliamentary and judicial oversight, constitutional constraints, the fight against disinformation, electoral integrity, resilient communities and citizen-oriented governance as issues that Covid-19 has made more vital.[70]

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The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) is supporting various multi-sector Covid-19 programmes that include civil society and governance elements.[71] United Nations agencies have increased their efforts to protect children, women, refugees, prisoners and other vulnerable parts of global community.[72] Under the rubric of the Council of Europe, the European Committee on Democracy and Governance has been sharing best-practice guidelines on elections, rights, civil participation and e-democracy in the management of Covid-19.[73] The OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights has closely monitored the implications of emergency measures for democracy and compliance with human rights and fundamental freedoms.[74] The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development has also reinforced the good governance elements of its programmes.[75]

Many democracy organisations have also responded. The National Democratic Institute is providing support to legislatures[76] and local governments across the world in managing crisis communications and helping citizens understand government responses to the pandemic.[77] The Open Government Partnership launched a platform called Open Response + Open Recovery that serves as an information sharing space for open government approaches to Covid-19.[78] International IDEA has stepped up its work to produce comparative knowledge and provide technical assistance and advisory services on Covid-19 management focusing in

particular on elections, parliamentary oversight, constitutional provisions, the importance of political-party roles and new voting arrangements for elections. The National Endowment for Democracy has provided flexible emergency funds and increased rapid response funding.[79]

The European Endowment for Democracy (EED) has provided core grant support to civil activists and independent media to address new needs and challenges that arose following the crisis. Additionally, EED launched a specific Covid-19 response scheme to facilitate immediate actions among media and civil activists.[80] The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) continues to track global election postponements and provide a range of resources, including the IFES Covid-19 Briefing Series which offers guidance to democracy and governance practitioners on seven fundamental challenges they face in the wake of the pandemic.[81] Human rights organisations like Amnesty International[82] and Human Rights Watch have strengthened monitoring of human rights components of the policies adopted by governments amid the Covid-19 outbreak.[83] The Board of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum has pushed for stronger procedures to safeguard the rule of law, democracy and human rights.[84]

Civil society challenges in times of Covid-19

Despite these responses, democracy support risks losing momentum since the international community has understandably channelled more its

available resources into emergency pandemic responses. In preparing this report we heard from many democracy CSOs that have had funding rather abruptly cut as donors shift resources to Covid-19 priorities. This has forced them to cut staff and stop operations that will be difficult to recover later on. One Armenian civic leader laments that 'we have been left more vulnerable just when the community needed us most'.

CSO representatives note that while some donor organisations were relatively flexible and adapted support for operational sustainability at the start of the pandemic, most have not allowed project activities to be adjusted. We heard from nearly all our CSO interlocutors that most donors have imposed heavily bureaucratic conditions that militate against social organisations adapting. One Middle East activist told us that funding cuts and donor inflexibility have together led to 'a massive shrinking of implemented activities on the ground' related to human rights and democracy in this region.

Many activists told us they are having to lie low for the moment but need help to plan for ways in which they can rebuild democratic activities beyond the emergency period. In this they fear many donors and funding organisations are now diluting pressure on non-democratic regimes in order to work with them on Covid-19 issues and that this leaves CSOs' basic security compromised in the face of increased state repression – we heard this message from Balkan, Eastern European and Arab states, and from Turkey. Nearly all CSOs fear that economic recession

will squeeze and deplete their resource base dramatically to the point that the survival of many activist organisations will be in doubt.

Civil society representatives also fear that in the post-Covid environment donors will divert political funding to programmes related to economic recovery. **In this context, CSOs are calling for greater accountability over economic recovery programmes, amid the increased need for oversight of donor funded economic aid.** Similarly, we heard a common story from Western Balkan CSOs of international funding being re-oriented towards state capacity building and away from those areas where governments are closing off access, like media freedom, judicial independence and the protection of human rights. As another Middle Eastern activist warned: 'economic recovery will not succeed if there is no good governance and oversight of these programmes.' CSOs themselves have begun to create innovative accountability and scrutiny initiatives but feel they are getting little support from the international community for these.

CSOs also express concerns about being left more vulnerable by the shift to online activities. One activist in a particularly sensitive environment fears that the international community is supporting much online civic activity that is not secure: 'we do not trust the devices [being supported]'. Our interlocutors placed great stress on the fact that donors are not doing nearly enough to help CSOs' digital empowerment in this new context.

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And CSOs from countries in conflict are worried that the international community is withdrawing just when they are seeking to restore local community bridge-building efforts around the crisis. In the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, CSOs are worried that the EU is retreating further from accession perspectives – which many democracy activists still see as the most important guarantor of democratic norms.

Support for democracy will gain importance and be especially vital for the long-term recuperation from the pandemic. Recovery can't effectively happen without enhanced state capacity and good governance, including the safeguarding of oversight, scrutiny, civic participation and responsive politics, among other things. These features are also relevant to other challenges on the agenda, like climate change, social justice and the struggle for rights-equality driving the current sweep of protests in the US and beyond. Democracy assistance helps build strong civil-society organisations that can help wider society meet a range of complex challenges, especially in a public health crisis context. These organisations can help generate on-the-ground information about where needs are most pressing, and also keep corruption and misuse of aid in check. Such support can help countries be more adaptable to the challenges ahead. And it will be of vital importance in pushing back against the possibility of Covid-19 empowering autocratic politics.

> **'Democracy assistance helps build strong civil-society organisations that can help wider society meet a range of complex challenges, especially in a public health crisis context.'**

Anti-corruption effect on fatality rates from Covid-19
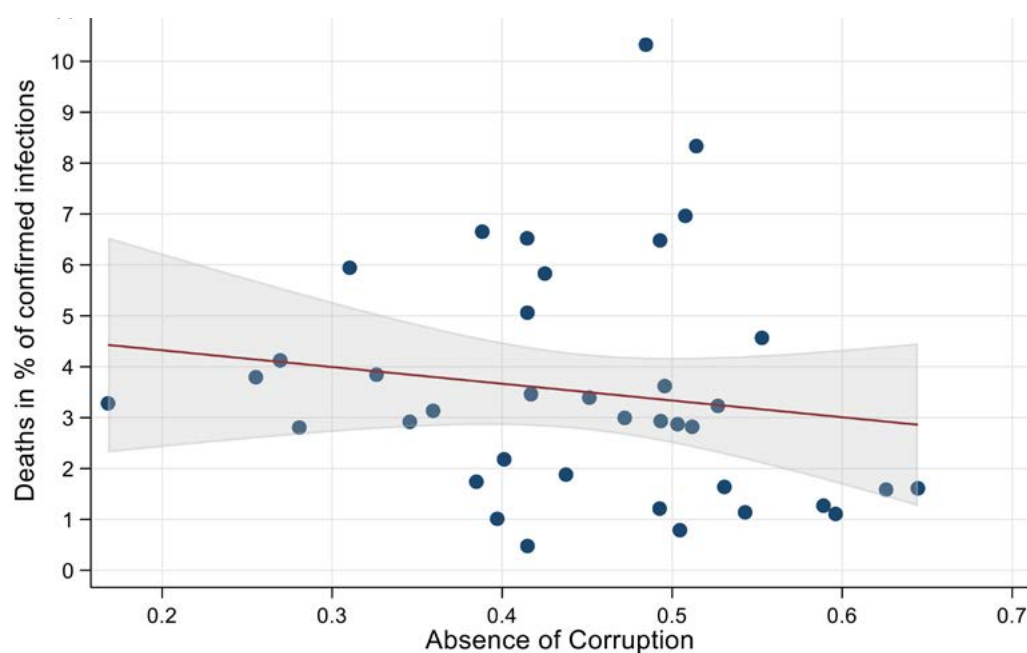
Deaths in % of confirmed infections in 38 middle income democracies, 62 days after exceeding 100 conf. infections.
The line denotes average estimated fatality rates conditional upon corruption levels. Shaded areas: 95% confidence interval
Sources: Johns Hopkins University 22 June 2020; World Bank; International IDEA, www.idea.int/gsod-indices

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS

Well before the Covid-19 pandemic struck there was a need for international democracy support to adjust to a global trend of democratic backsliding and declines in civic freedoms.[85]

Many of the improvements required remain urgent as Covid-19 responses have revealed systemic governance and democracy challenges and a need to prepare for a next crisis requiring responsive and inclusive political

processes. Covid-19 also invites those concerned with international democracy to consider a number of more specific modifications that have become more pressing due to the Covid-19 crisis. They would benefit from considering five very concrete policy initiatives:

Covid Democracy Tracking

A fully coordinated effort is required from international organisations methodically to track the evolution of restrictive emergency measures. A Covid Democracy Monitor should track whether governments are removing crisis measures as and

'A Covid Democracy Monitor should track whether governments are removing crisis measures as and when the health situation allows.'

when the health situation allows. This could be structured around major threats to democracy posed by the pandemic as outlined above. Various international efforts have been undertaken in this regard. The Westminster Foundation for Democracy has started a Covid-19 Tracker and a Global Monitor on Covid-19's Impact on Democracy and Human Rights is being launched by the European Commission and International IDEA.[86] However, more global effort is necessary in this regard. International organisations need to scale up such monitoring efforts and give them far more high-level political backing. They should support similar cross-regional and international initiatives especially for those countries with weak checks-and-balances. Specialised tracking and analysis could offer guidance to local actors to better engage in democratic oversight. Monitoring is required not just of in-country measures but

equally of international responses to these. Democracy organisations should not overplay their hand: many restrictions have been necessary and may still have some relevance to immediate public health priorities. Not every measure merits criticism; polls suggest many of them still enjoy public backing. Rather, monitoring must home in tightly on those measures that governments are using disingenuously to further their own political aims and hold on power. As there is uncertainty over emergency measures' impact on democracy, a Covid Democracy Monitor would make a huge contribution if it could disentangle medically justified from politically nefarious emergency measures. Crucially, governments and international organisations should ensure tangible action is taken on the basis of such detailed and systematic Covid-19 monitoring.

Democracy-sensitive Covid aid

Donors, multilateral organisations and philanthropists will begin to channel significant shares of their development aid towards humanitarian emergency relief associated with the pandemic. It is right that vulnerable people across the world receive this help and that such emergency relief is not politicised to the point that individuals' lives are put at risk. Yet it would also be important to ensure that the forthcoming wave of medical aid and funds aimed at helping economic recovery also foster democratic delivery and do not unduly empower authoritarian leaders. Institutions and political processes marked by inclusion,

'The international community should commit to including civil society and rights-oriented funding within post-Covid recovery packages.'

representation, transparency and responsiveness provide the best guarantees to this end.

The international community should commit to including civil society and rights-oriented funding within post-Covid recovery packages. Democracy support needs to be made a more integral part of getting closed regimes to be more honest and transparent about Covid trends and share scientific work.[87] Some modest parts of macro-economic aid might come with democracy-related conditionality; this should not be applied too heavy-handedly but used sparingly to help prompt governments to restore rights curtailed during the emergency. The Covid monitoring would identify loopholes in democratic practices and help tailor reform-based aid decisions. Governments and international organisations should commit to ring-fencing a higher proportion of their total aid for efforts related to civil society, human rights, good governance and democracy.

Crucially, democracy-sensitive Covid-19 aid should work more effectively to strengthen state capacities and the role of formal institutions in democratic processes. This will be integral to a long-term perspective that helps prepare the next health crisis. Supporting democratic oversight by parliaments, political parties, electoral commissions and civil society will help to achieve these objectives, democracy aid has often provided vitally important support to civil society and opposition forces against governments inclined to grip strongly onto power. But in the Covid-19 era state capacity will be important to manage health priorities and the socio-economic imbalances that the crisis accentuates. The donor community should also invest more in tying together civic and state capacity-building in a mutually reinforcing way. CSOs themselves told us they want more of this 'cross-sector' support to engage with state bodies and that they feel democracy organisations still under-provide this kind of help. The future agenda is likely to require civic and well-functioning state capacities to be enhanced in tandem with each other. Both civil society and institutional perspectives will need to be taken on board to fine-tune this kind of joined-up support.

Covid Global Civics

International democracy support needs a concerted effort to target new civic initiatives that are emerging as a result of the pandemic – as donors are likely to focus more on government capacity-building and post-Covid economic recovery there is a risk that these promising initiatives will get overlooked. Amidst all the gloomy political developments the formation of such groups represents the most positive change to come out of the crisis. These initiatives give CSOs and donors a chance to reconnect with local communities, regain legitimacy and show that democracy support is not neglectful of people's day-to-day concerns. Higher levels of support and coordination will be needed to sustain and link together all the new Covid, health related civil society

'A truly multilateral response is required to democracy and Covid-19 that includes all regions of the world.'

activity with human rights and democracy questions. International networks can help move the new local civic dynamism to a more national and political level – as and where local citizens desire this.

There are also possible concerns to head-off. Efforts will be needed to ensure that over the medium-term civil society does not get dragged away too much from its more political concerns. Civil society needs to be helped contain the rights abuses, gender violence and educational imbalances that the pandemic is exacerbating. Support for independent media should be given top priority as many outlets face an existential struggle for survival. International efforts are needed to support the financial sustainability of media in times of pandemic and in the post-pandemic environment. These efforts could be built around efforts to establish an International Fund for Public Interest Media (IFPIM).[88]

Perhaps most pressingly, despite the new civic vibrancy the economic squeeze that lies ahead could put civil society funding in acute danger. Governments and international organisations could launch dedicated funding schemes specifically to help the new civic initiatives that have emerged due to Covid-19 and use this to inject democracy support with greater legitimacy and relevance. The international community already has an agreed commitment to support civil society within the Nairobi Outcome Document; this could be used more systematically to buttress these aims.[89] In the Covid-19 context, CSOs and independent media will need more multiannual core support as their resources may dwindle.

International coordination on Democracy

The international democracy community needs to step up its coordination in the wake of the pandemic. A truly multilateral response is required to democracy and Covid-19 that includes all regions of the world. In particular, such coordination should involve countries that have engineered successful responses to crisis including through maintaining functioning democratic institutions throughout the crisis – like Canada, Korea, New Zealand and Taiwan. These countries – perhaps joined by one or two of the best performing European and other democracies - could form the core of a group of front-runner states that begin to convene international democracy efforts in the months ahead.

An international initiative could be advanced to foreground how Asian, African and some Latin American democracies have performed well and to highlight the governance lessons that emerge from their experiences. It could be kicked-off with a high-profile (virtual) event to generate political momentum. This multilateral coordination should focus on sharing lessons between democracies; more effectively showing democracy's advantages in crises; common positions where democratic rights are threatened; and perhaps even coordinated programming activities on the ground in some places. It should also pursue long-term planning:

'The post-pandemic development agenda shall put a special emphasis on strategic planning and inclusive analysis of experiences stemming from the current crisis.'

democracies need to share lessons on how they can prepare better for emergencies and plan ahead pre-emptively to mitigate their impact. Framing an initiative in these terms would help develop a narrative that presents democracy as helpful to Covid-19 priorities – combatting the notion that there is a trade-off between political freedoms and effective health responses. Far stronger international coordination will also be needed to tackle one of the most serious challenges that is emerging from the pandemic: a China that is emboldened to be more assertive outside its own borders and whose undemocratic model could be increasingly followed by others; this will be especially urgent in Hong Kong but present elsewhere too.

Post-Covid Democratic Practices

Today's challenge is not simply about doubling-down on defending democracy. A deeper rethink is opportune to the extent that the pandemic will remould many democratic practices. The post-pandemic development agenda shall put a special emphasis on strategic planning and inclusive analysis of experiences stemming from the current crisis. The Covid-19 pandemic revealed the shortcomings in preparedness level of all countries across the world. Strategic planning is a democratic prerequisite enabling measured responses and avoiding panicked reactions. Hence, an enhanced focus is warranted on foresight in crisis management, which would limit the negative effects of ad-hoc measures on democracy.

Democracy organisations and donors should coordinate an initiative specifically targeting this question and support post-Covid innovations in democratic forms. Recent weeks have seen a flourishing of digital deliberation, creative online protest, parliamentary digitalisation and the like. The acceleration of e-voting is also significant, despite remaining challenges to ensuring safety and public trust in online votes. Opinions are divided over how valuable and long-lasting such innovations will be. Certainly, international efforts could be valuable in ensuring these piecemeal efforts coalesce into an effective programme for oversight of all key democratic institutions. Governments and international organisations should launch an initiative to explore both the potential and downsides of these innovations. This should involve an extensive mapping of emergent innovations along with seed-funding and a 'risk fund' to provide them with flexible support. It should be more structured and systematic than each funder simply supporting a few such innovations sporadically and on its own accord.

In particular, democracy organisations need to develop better connections with the tech developments that the crisis has accelerated and work to ensure these are for rather than against better quality democratic politics. They will need to pay special attention to new ways of monitoring elections in the context of pandemic, and also to the need for stronger accountability mechanisms to deal with the increase in corruption described above. These innovations need to be developed and channelled in a direction that demonstrates their relevance to the key issues that will dominate the long-term recovery period: healthcare, economic regeneration and democratic governance.

In conclusion, the post-Covid environment will look different and require new ideas and approaches to safeguard democratic practices and combat authoritarian abuses. Many problems will look graver than before, with wider economic and political divides straining inclusive politics. Countries will face different kinds of problems in tackling the social and economic consequences of the pandemic. More nationally oriented practices could take root over the longer term and pose further challenges to democratic governance. The international community will need to be prepared for another wave of populism and spread of nationalistic narratives. Those concerned with democracy need to help governments, international organisations and civil society reformers lift their heads from the immediate tragedy of the pandemic and factor in these longer-term political issues.

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