

What will the world look like after the pandemic?

Abstract

The world is in turmoil. The corona-pandemic continues to take lives and disrupt daily lives across the globe. This happens against a backdrop of a declining US and western-based world order and a resurgence of authoritarian rulers. In this essay, I discuss the inability of the international community to respond to the pandemic, especially as it relates to helping countries in armed conflict. At the end of March, the UN Secretary-General issued an urgent plea for a worldwide ceasefire to help communities cope with the pandemic. The plea was not met with adequate international support. I moreover show that regimes across the globe have used the pandemic to restrict political and civil liberties. In sum, we risk emerging from the pandemic as a less democratic world.

In September 2015, the international community agreed on 17 new Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) as part of the new sustainable development agenda. The 17 new SDGs got the baton from the previous Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In contrast to the relatively closed process that led to the eight original MDGs, arriving at the 17 SDGs involved stakeholders from across the world. In addition to the critical role played by member states and the UN system, and especially the Economic and Social Commission (ECOSOC), the process included civil society, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academics, and activists across the globe. In what has been characterized as the largest hearing in world history, the UN asked for input from anyone anywhere.

This underscored the fact that these new goals are supposed to belong to the people as the people's 'global goals.'

Several of the old MDGs, especially those relating to poverty reduction and improving education, were kept as part of the new SDG framework. In addition, a series of new goals were added that had not been part of the MDG agenda. Most controversial and contested among those were the goals relating to inequality (SDG 10), climate change (SDG 13), and peace and justice (SDG 16). They also included goals relating to international cooperation. During the negotiations for the original MDGs, many countries had wanted such goals included in that framework as well. For instance, Norway and the other Scandinavian countries wanted the reduction of violence and

conflict to be one specific MDG. This, however, proved too politically sensitive. Countries such as China and Russia argued that questions of war and peace were outside the mandate of the UN agencies' developmental agenda and was the sole purview of the Security Council. Indeed, a large group of especially African countries was concerned that such a goal could be used by the UN and the international community as a justification to intervene in their internal affairs. It was, therefore, surprising to many observers when the UN members states in the end unanimously managed to agree on the inclusion of not just a goal for peace and justice, but also goals for climate change, and inequality as part of the new SDGs. South Korea was an important lobbyist for these transformational goals.

SDG 16 - the enabler

Since 2015, the international community has made great progress towards the SDG agenda. Unfortunately, many of those gains appear to be at risk of being reversed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Here I focus in particular on three crucial aspects of the SDG agenda—achieving peaceful societies, building just and accountable organizations (what we what call democracy), and fostering international cooperation. These three are a small part of the overall SDG agenda, but they also constitute a crucial foundation for all the other goals. Indeed, SDG 16, in particular, has become to be seen as ‘the

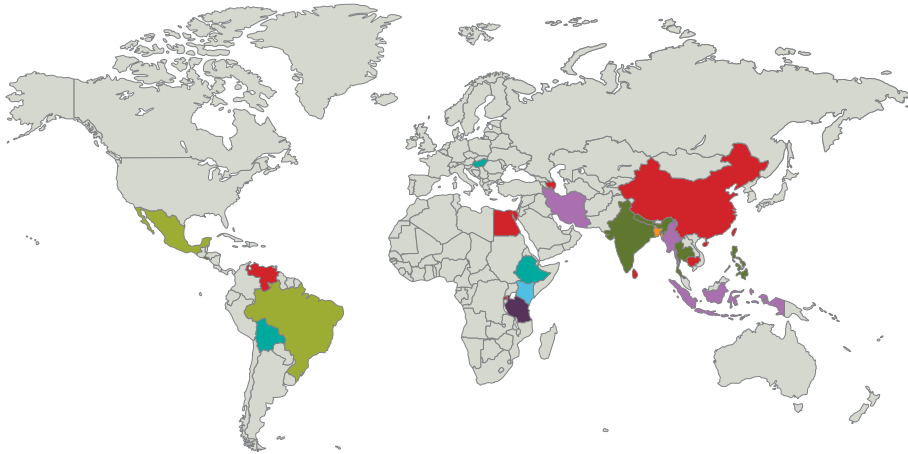
enabler’ of almost all the other goals.

Take as an example of this new SDG 4 on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education. SDG 4 further includes seven targets covering, for instance, ensuring quality primary and secondary education for all and eliminating gender disparities in education. These targets, however, can not be achieved by an exclusive focus on education. Any functioning education system relies on a well-functioning state with a professional and independent but accountable bureaucracy. In short, good education relies on good governance. Moreover, achieving the education goals is next to impossible in contexts marked by large-scale armed conflict and endemic violence. Indeed, as Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has noted, “conflict remains the largest obstacle to development.”² For education, we have concrete evidence of this link. Gates et al. (2012) analyzed the effect of armed conflict on the MDGs and found a detrimental effect of conflict across several of them. They showed that a war with 10,000 battle deaths, and average size conflict, is associated with a relative decrease in the educational attainment of about 7.5 percentage points. Put simply, countries in conflict fail to provide their children with primary education.³

Enter COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic started undermining SDG 16 efforts almost as quickly as it began to spread. Here I would

-
1. Dr Håvard Mogleiv Nygård (PhD, University of Oslo, 2014) is Research Director at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). Nygård's main research interests are related to understanding the causes, consequences and dynamics of armed conflict, contentious action, peacebuilding, and social order. His research has been published in inter alia the *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*, *World Politics*, *Journal of Peace Research*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, and *World Development*. Nygård regularly consults for various international organizations such as the World Bank, the United Nations Development Program, the Community of Democracies, the EU External Action Services, and the Human Security Report.
 2. See the *2015 MDG progress report*: [https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20\(July%201\).pdf](https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20(July%201).pdf).
 3. Gates, S., Hegre, H., Nygård, H. M., & Strand, H. (2012). Development consequences of armed conflict. *World Development*, 40(9), 1713-1722.



Human rights violation

- Arrest of critics
- Governments withhold information
- Police brutality
- Spread of misinformation
- Excessive force
- New emergency law
- Restricting liberties of prisoners
- Stifle free speech

like to highlight two particular dimensions and have a somewhat closer look at how the pandemic is affecting democratic rule across the globe and how it affects ongoing internal armed conflicts.

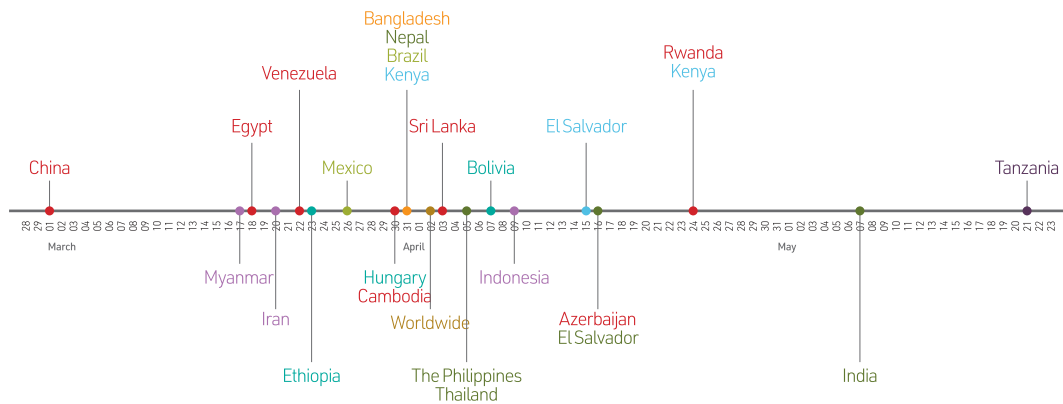
What happens to democratic rule?

Since March, the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) has attempted to track and monitor how governments have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. In many cases, the picture is deeply concerning. In December of last year, the Chinese state jailed a physician in the city of Wuhan. His crime had been to warn authorities against the occurrence of a potentially contagious and deadly new virus. The physician, Dr. Li Wenliang, died from the same disease whose spread he tried to contain.

This established a pattern. As the coronavirus and the COVID-19 disease spread, regimes across the world responded by attacking and arresting critics, violating human rights, and by

imposing unchecked and draconian emergency laws. The contagion is shown in the Map above. Towards the end of March of this year, Human Rights Watch noticed a disturbing pattern. Across South-East Asia, in countries such as Cambodia, Philippines, Thailand, and Myanmar, governments were actively taking advantage of the coronavirus pandemic to crack down on critics in the process of curtailing core civil and political liberties.

It is, of course, nothing new that regimes take advantage of events to secure their position or extend their power. Democratically elected regimes do that probably just as often as autocratic regimes. Often, this is completely legitimate, such as a democratically elected government calling a new election when times are good and the economy is booming. It is also perfectly legitimate, though of course also debatable, that many democratic regimes have used emergency powers granted them within existing laws or enacted limited emergency



Description ● Arrest of critics ● Government withhold information ● New UN resolution ● Restricting liberties of prisoners ● Stifle free speech
 ● Excessive force ● New emergency law ● Police brutality ● Spread of misinformation

laws to deal with the coronavirus pandemic.

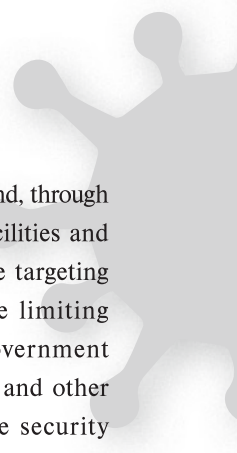
Beyond such completely legitimate measures, however, governments have, unfortunately, shown great ingenuity in figuring out how and why human rights have to be sacrificed in order to fight the pandemic. We have categorized efforts in eight different categories: arrests of critics, excessive use of force, intentionally withholding information, enacting new emergency laws, police brutality, restricting liberties of prisoners, spreading of misinformation, and stifling of free speech.

A timeline of such actions is shown in the figure above. It marks when something happened, what country as well as what category of actions they were. We see a flurry of actions particularly concentrated within the month from mid-March to mid-April. After this, we have seen much fewer specific actions, though this may very well change as the pandemic moves around the globe.

It may not be surprising that so much

has happened within this four-week window. This is the period when the global awareness of the grave risk the pandemic can pose started to increase as the pandemic took hold among all countries confronting it. We would expect, and could even to a large extent forgive, some government missteps as well as over-reactions in this window. Early efforts to downplay the risk of the pandemic, including arresting critics, would fall within the scope of such actions.

Beyond this, however, we see that governments did not attempt to rectify past missteps. Instead, they have doubled down on the use of force and human rights abuses in their response to the virus. We also see governments, most famously the Hungarian, that enact emergency laws with little or no limits on scope and with no expiration date. These actions have had some almost tragically comic results: while Jair Bolsonaro in Brasil has downplayed and ridiculed the pandemic, criminal gangs have instead stepped up and are enacting measures to



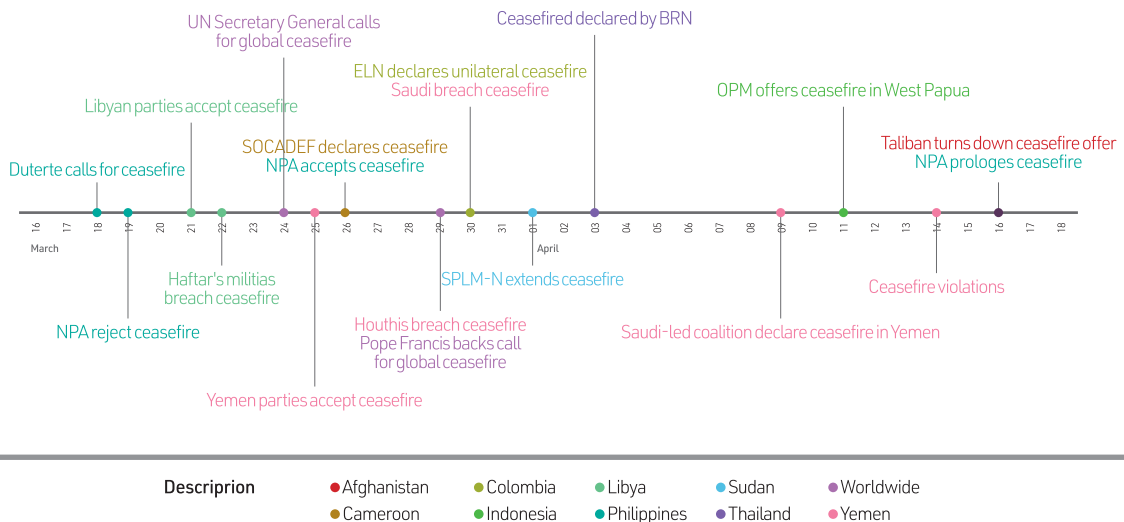
prevent contagion.

This pattern, of democratic backsliding and a tightening of the autocratic screw, we know from the past. Autocrats and wannabe dictators can use precisely these tools to undermine existing institutions and secure their own power. Once more firmly secured, these powers are hard to take back. Unfortunately, this means that the world will be less democratic after the coronavirus than it was before.

Peace and conflict in the age of corona

Pandemics can have especially dramatic effects in countries in active conflict. Conflict and violent contention affect both the supply and the demand for health services – simultaneously increasing demand for health services, through the direct and indirect effects of

fighting, and decreasing demand, through the destruction of health facilities and infrastructure, the deliberate targeting of health workers, and the limiting and re-prioritization of government resources away from health and other public services towards the security sector. Conflict and contention take place in contexts where public health is already severely constrained. In turn, the same conflict can put these fragile institutions under unbearable stress. As a consequence, the aftereffects of conflict can easily overshadow direct effects such as battle-related deaths. Past research has shown that conflicts kill and maim people long after they have ended. Indeed, the globally devastating Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918 to 1920 came as a direct consequence of the First World War as soldiers returning home from





© YONHAPNEWS

battle spread the disease while health services, already straining from the war effort, became completely overwhelmed. In the end, the Spanish Flu killed many more people than the War killed soldiers. In short, conflict and contention are a public health issue. When you get a global pandemic superimposed on such dynamics, things can quickly spiral completely out of control.

Consequently, on 23 March 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for a global ceasefire to combat the coronavirus pandemic. The appeal quickly gathered widespread support. Armed groups and governments in over 14 countries have initiated ceasefires in response to the call. This includes Yemen, Afghanistan, and Syria – three countries that have recently experienced some of the world's bloodiest conflicts. Did these

ceasefires affect the level of violence? PRIO has collected data on coronavirus ceasefire initiatives. At present, we have seen coronavirus ceasefire initiatives in a total of 14 countries. These are shown in the timeline above. Of these 14 countries, 7 have seen calls for ceasefires but no declarations, 5 currently have a ceasefire in place, and 2 have declared ceasefires which have already been breached. The timeline indicates when and where the various ceasefires have been implemented.

The aim of these ceasefires was to create a break in violence to allow vulnerable populations living in conflict-affected countries to prepare for and manage the threat posed by the pandemic. Regrettably, the best available data shows that this call has failed to produce any significant shift in global levels of violence. In most cases, unilateral

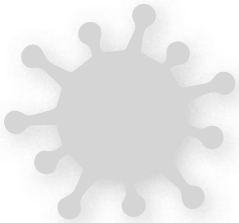


4. See: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13510347.2019.1582029>.



© YONHAPNEWS

Guterres' call for a global ceasefire was met with support and applause from governments, NGOs, and belligerent parties alike.



ceasefires have not been reciprocated, and ceasefire initiatives are diminishing. Notably, the UN Security Council has been unable to agree on a resolution, and an attempt drafted by France and Tunisia was shut down by the US on 8 May 2020. Thus, the UN is not able to provide any significant support to help preserve or extend the short-term lulls in violence that have emerged.

Guterres' call for a global ceasefire was met with support and applause from governments, NGOs, and belligerent parties alike. Yet, it has still not substantively changed the situation on the ground. People living in conflict-affected areas still have to grapple with ongoing active conflict at the same time as they prepare for or try to cope with the coronavirus pandemic.

Global levels of conflict violence remain unchanged, and in specific cases, we do not see signs of more than short-lived lulls in the fighting. While the members of the UN Security Council were not able to agree on a resolution, people in conflict areas are now suffering a double crisis. It is past time that the international community and individual governments announce stronger measures to ensure that the global call does not become a wasted opportunity.

The next chapter

The coronavirus pandemic hit a world already in turmoil. As has been reported by the Varieties of Democracy Project, the world has seen two consecutive years of democratic recession.⁴ The pandemic appears to be speeding up, or at least entrenching that process. One important factor for this is the complete abdication of the US from the world stage. The current pandemic will be seen as the first global emergency since the Second World War, where the US did not step up and take a leading role. More than that, countries, including formerly close European allies of the US, are not even expecting the US to lead. Just a few years ago, that would have been unthinkable. Various countries have attempted to fill some of the voids, at least regionally. But these could never compensate for the absence of a strong US presence.

The Secretary-General of the UN has also been too quiet. Ever since the passage of the Sustainable Development

Goals, and especially SDG 16, the UN has had a clear mandate to support and defend 'inclusive, accountable, and just' institutions. If there ever were a time, we would have needed the UN to step up to that challenge; it would have been now.

But no one really stepped up. Because of this, the many governments that have resorted to repression and the limiting of democratic institutions have been able to do so without being called out or sanctioned. Their behavior has been implicitly accepted. Rolling back what they have done will be very hard. Likewise, without the strong US, the Security Council has grown even more dysfunctional. Instead of agreeing on the resolution in support of Guterres' call for a ceasefire, China and the US have been locked in a ridiculous debate over 'whose fault it all is.' China, and the response of the Chinese government to the outbreak, deserves all the criticism it is getting, but past US governments would not have held people living in conflict across the globe hostage to such debates.

The present climate for international cooperation also makes it almost impossible to have a constructive discussion of how the World Health Organization (WHO) and the UN have handled the outbreak. WHO's handling needs to be evaluated, and there appear to be good reasons for criticizing them for a slow response and for being insufficiently independent from the Chinese government. The Trump administration's handling and defunding of the WHO has, however, made it

almost impossible to have a sensible and constructive discussion of how WHO should be reformed and strengthened for the next pandemic.

As the world starts recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an urgent need to realize and appreciate some fundamental challenges the pandemic has served to highlight. The first and most basic is that the international community was far from as prepared as we should have been for a pandemic. We know that we are increasingly more interconnected. That is a good thing, but it also makes us more vulnerable. That means we have to have a strong, capable, and independent WHO with the resources and the mandate to respond quickly and forcefully to the emergence of threats such as the coronavirus. Individual countries themselves also have to reconsider their own emergency preparedness. But we also need to grapple with the fact that democracy is increasingly under threat – both from within and from outside. Democratic governments need to shore up their own institutions as well as joining together to forcefully rebuke attempts to erode democratic organizations. This should also include revitalizing international organizations such as the Community of Democracies. Lastly, we need to re-invigorate international cooperation more generally. The UN desperately needs new life, and supporters of an interconnected, peaceful, and global community need to step up.

