



**The Future  
of Democracy**

# The Populists and the Pandemic

At first glance, it may seem that the coronavirus has dealt populist governments a blow. Yet a closer look reveals how many have managed to capitalize on the pandemic. And the causes of populism will if anything be further exacerbated by the crisis.

By Aline Burni

**M**any of the countries led by populist governments have been among the hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. By October 2020, the United States, Brazil, Russia, and India ranked as the top four countries in terms of the total number of infections. Joined by the United Kingdom and Mexico, these populist-led nations were all among the current ten most affected by the coronavirus outbreak, according to the list compiled by the Johns Hopkins University in mid-October.

In spite of variations in their responses, there are plausible reasons to associate the reactions of populists with a particularly rapid and harmful spread of the coronavirus among their countries' population. Although more systematic studies still need to be conducted, populist governments are generally considered to have performed worst in terms of their ability to limit the spread of the virus. Attitudes of populist leaders seem to have played a role. For instance, US President Donald Trump and his Brazilian counterpart, Jair Bolsonaro, have

consistently played down the seriousness of the disease. Their approach fostered a politicization of the crisis, an increase in social polarization, and encouraged supporters to disrespect social distancing, the use of facemasks, and compliance with other preventive measures.

Against this background, some observers have argued that the pandemic exposed the limits of populists in government. Their anti-elite style and hostility toward science prevented effective policy responses and, therefore, populists would be expected to drastically lose credibility in the aftermath of the crisis.

However, does that necessarily mean that the COVID-19 pandemic is triggering an end to populism around the globe? On the contrary, in spite of their failures in managing the crisis, it remains unlikely that populists will vanish because of the outbreak, as their support is driven by forces that are structural and long-term. Those drivers will likely be aggravated by the pandemic, creating

favorable conditions for an upsurge of populist support.

It is important when talking about populism to agree on what we mean by the term. According to a widely accepted definition, the populist worldview separates society on moral grounds into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite.” Populists argue that politics should be the expression of the “general will” of the people, and portray themselves as the only alternative to represent such a will. Populists are the anti-elite, they frame the elite as a self-interested group that takes decisions which adversely affect the people and their sovereignty. Populism is often combined with other host ideologies, such as socialism, neoliberalism, or nativism. As such, populist politicians and movements can be located across the political-ideological spectrum, mostly either on the extreme left or extreme right.

Here, I will focus on radical right populists. Two additional features characterize this variety: nativism and authoritarianism. Nativism attributes an exclusionary nature to the populist appeal and can be understood as the search for a homogeneous community, either in cultural, ethnical, linguistic, or religious terms. In the nativist view, what is “non-native” is perceived as a threat. Authoritarianism refers to the belief in a strictly ordered society, which values hierarchy and severe punishment of violations against social conventions and the law.

Effective crisis management entails a forward-looking assessment of the seriousness of the situation, transparent communication, trust building, and unity, as well as the ability to make difficult policy choices and learn with constantly updating information. In this process, relying on scientific evidence is crucial, especially in

the case of a medical emergency. Populists have failed in most of these tasks. There is some evidence that populist-led governments took relatively longer to react and prepare for the outbreak, although in the single aspect of closing the borders, they have been, unsurprisingly, faster. Some populists neglected the seriousness of COVID-19, others treated the crisis as a security issue, adopting draconian measures. Some disregarded the recommendations of health authorities and experts, and have personally endorsed drugs and treatments in the absence of scientific evidence about their efficacy.

### **Denial, Law and Order, Power Grabs**

The coronavirus pandemic is an unfolding crisis. Systematic analyses still have to be developed in order to establish a clear correlation between the type of regime and the effectiveness of crisis response. Hence, it is not fully determined to what extent populist leadership has caused particularly negative outcomes related to COVID-19. Other factors beyond regime type or leadership style can also play a significant role, such as pre-existing health infrastructure, wealth, safety nets, demographic density, or even aspects of the civic culture. A study by the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, for example, indicates that, in general, populist and non-populist governments have implemented similar containment policy measures. Among populist governments, not all have responded in the same way. According to an analysis by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 12 out of 17 populist governments currently in power have taken the COVID-19 crisis seriously. As a whole, it appears that three main types of responses have characterized populist regimes during the coronavirus outbreak: denial, focussing on law and order, and power grabbing.



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Brazil and the United States typify a denial response. Both Trump and Bolsonaro played down the lethality of the coronavirus and discouraged citizens from complying with social distancing rules. Moreover, they disrespected health measures imposed by their own governments, supported popular protests, and lacked the transparency to release official information. Ironically, despite being infected by COVID-19 themselves, neither Trump nor Bolsonaro changed their approach to it. Both leaders have engaged in conflicts with former health ministers and advisors, encouraged the use of unproven substances as cures, and blamed regional authorities for the economic impact following the lockdown measures, which they actively opposed. As a result, the US and Brazil experienced the longest plateaus of COVID-19.

Illustrative of the law-and-order response are countries like India and the Philippines. In the latter, President Rodrigo Duterte imposed one of the longest and severest lockdowns in the world. This stark response has been coupled with a largely punitive and militaristic implementation of COVID-19 measures. Duterte ordered quarantine violators to be shot and in-

creased the level of repression toward the population, leading to the arrest of protesters, journalists, and human rights activists. The Filipino government ordered the police to accompany medics and transfer infected patients to isolation facilities, while citizens have been encouraged to report infected neighbors in hiding. Duterte recently extended the nationwide “state of calamity” by a year, claiming it would allow the government to draw emergency funds faster. As public criticism toward the government increased, Duterte sharpened his tone. He censured health workers for publicly criticizing the administration and warned that a revolution would be “more dangerous than COVID-19.”

India also experienced one of the strictest lockdowns. Prime Minister Narendra Modi took the drastic move of declaring a national lockdown for 21 days with only four hours’ notice. The lockdown was imposed without warning, planning, or transparency about the deliberations and scientific advice behind it. Such draconian measures hugely affected internal migrant workers, who became trapped. The lockdown further worsened the problem of vigilantism and violence against Muslims accused of spreading the virus with religious gatherings. Shutting down the country also opened the way to sending activists and journalists to jail.

Finally, Hungary and Poland are examples of attempts to grab power. Both governments have regarded the pandemic as an opportunity to expand their executive powers and undermine democratic institutions, although in different ways. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán implemented a state of emergency and passed legislation allowing tighter control of information as well as the imprisonment of journalists publishing allegedly false or distorted facts about COVID-19. Addi-

*India imposed a draconian lockdown with four hours’ notice*

tionally, the central government took away financial resources from local administrations and placed important state companies under partial military supervision.

To a lesser extent, in Poland there were also attempts by the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party to expand powers and improve its political advantage. Presidential elections had been scheduled to take place on May 10, in the middle of the pandemic. However, it became clear that campaigning in the normal way would put peoples' health and lives at risk. Despite the lockdown and the suspension of campaigning

### *Most populist-led countries are not among the safer democracies*

by candidates, PiS leaders initially refused to support the state of emergency and the postponing of the vote, before it was eventually delayed until June 28. Then, the government adopted a rapid change of the electoral voting system, replacing in-person voting with a postal ballot. In the second round of voting on July 12, Andrzej Duda was re-elected with a narrow margin. The Polish Supreme Court consid-

ered the election legitimate, but the election observing office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) judged the election not fair due to the unequal access of candidates to the media during the campaign.

A distinctive feature of populist regimes at this stage of the pandemic is the higher risk they pose to the quality of democracy, either by eroding institutions, centralizing executive powers, shrinking the space left to opposition, manipulating the media, or fostering social polarization. An analysis from the V-Dem Institute shows that government responses to COVID-19 may accelerate anti-democratic trends. Indeed, from the cases mentioned, most have experienced major violations of democratic principles and are at high risk of backsliding (Brazil, the US, Hungary, the Philippines, and India), while others suffered some violations and are under medium risk (Poland and Russia). Hence, most populist-led countries are not among the world's safer democracies.

#### **Pandemic Popularity**

The pandemic is posing huge challenges to all types of governments around the world. Despite the particular struggle of populist leaders to manage it appropriately, COVID-19 does not mean a defeat for them. It is not certain that populists in power will lose their support, and in many of those countries, public opinion data shows that the population has mostly supported their governments' actions against the spread of the coronavirus, at least during the first wave of infections. In fact, in some cases, their approval ratings have even increased during the pandemic, as happened with President Bolsonaro in Brazil, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey and Prime Minister Modi in India. There are at least



*The Indian lockdown worsened the problem of vigilantism and violence against Muslims, who were accused of spreading the virus with religious gatherings. The government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi also used it as an opportunity to silence critics*

three reasons why the phenomenon of populism itself is unlikely to end with the coronavirus.

First, the rise of populism has structural and long-term drivers. Several academic studies demonstrate that economic and/or cultural factors explain the populist surge, occasionally in combination. Among the causes, there is a longstanding transformation of the main dimensions of political conflict, which increasingly focuses on cultural cleavages and allows emphasis on identity politics. In many countries, social divisions and polarization have deepened. Support for right-wing populists often reflects a cultural backlash against the growth of post-materialist and liberal values among younger generations.

This means that support for populist parties cannot be simply explained as a protest vote, but rather is a result of adhesion to specific ideas and programs. Economic insecurity and injustices caused by globalization, which generates “winners” and “losers,” and perceptions of relative deprivation (not only in terms of income and economic status but also socially and politically) play a major role. Furthermore, populism is intrinsically linked to the perception that democratic regimes have failed and that political elites are untrustworthy. For years, there has been declining trust in political elites and public institutions, even in consolidated democracies.

Second, some of the drivers of populism are likely to be aggravated by the pandemic. Most nations will fall into economic recession. The downturn is projected to be significantly deeper than the latest global financial crisis. Economic growth will contract in every world region. Unemployment will drastically rise in most countries, and inequality is expected to increase.

The economic shock will reverse many years of progress in the direction of global development goals and tens of millions of people will return to extreme poverty. This means that socio-economic grievances will persist or be aggravated in a post-COVID-19 world. Vulnerable populations and constituencies that feel unrepresented by the major parties are likely to perceive they have been left behind. As political dissatisfaction increases, chances are that those “left behind” will opt for radical changes and support (supposedly) anti-establishment politicians.

### **An Opportunity to Amplify**

Third, populists have made instrumental use of the pandemic to centralize powers and try to mobilize by fomenting discontent and insecurity, denouncing the crisis as the failure of globalization, “open borders,” international organizations, and liberalism. The coronavirus pandemic offers them an opportunity to amplify the use of communication and mobilization strategies that have proven beneficial to the diffusion of their ideas. This includes the dissemination of fake news, conspiracy theories, and fact-free “information.”

For example, Bolsonaro has appeared in weekly livestreaming videos on social media as a direct communication channel with his followers. His message has, at least in part, proven effective in framing the coronavirus pandemic. A significant number of Brazilians (47 percent) do not

hold the president responsible for the hundreds of thousands of deaths caused by COVID-19.

In general, social media has given populists the freedom to articulate and spread their ideology. Studies have shown that the emergence of fake news is among the explanatory factors for the growing success of populists. As expected, COVID-19 has been linked to the emergence of a series of new conspiracy theories and, in many cases, these are directly related to populist movements and leaders around the world.

Populist regimes have not all responded in the same way to the COVID-19 pandemic and they will possibly suffer different impacts in the course of the outbreak. The populist surge around the globe of recent years cannot be explained by one single cause. Context-specific aspects must be taken into account. In fact, the rise of populism is often explained by a convergence of factors, including socio-economic transformations, the strategies and organizational abilities of leaders and movements, as well as changing political preferences and attitudes of individuals, mainly toward democracy and traditional political elites.

One of the reasons why populism cannot be considered overcome at this point is that most populists in power have taken the opportunity to accelerate authoritarian measures. Still, this is not the only reason for their expected resilience. The root causes of populism remain in place and are likely to be aggravated in the aftermath of the pandemic. The crisis of liberal democracy, social and economic grievances, as well as the political use of mechanisms of radicalization and the spread of false information are factors that allowed populism to flourish in the first place. They need to be addressed if populism is to be contained in the years to come. **IP**