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Democracy During a Global Pandemic

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Democracy During a Global Pandemic

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“Democracy is the government of the people, by the people, for the people.” – Abraham Lincoln

Through out the course of 2020-2021, Canadians have watched and seen our country change fundamentally as a result of the pandemic, whether it be daily routine changes, to the implementation of curfews (in Quebec), or the grey lockdown situation seen throughout southern Ontario. However, the pandemic has created unique challenges that impact democracy and human rights; governments worldwide have reacted to the pandemic in ways that best serve their political interests at the expense of public health and basic freedoms, rather than seeking to protect the civil and personal securities of their citizens.

As a result of the immense pressure on healthcare systems internationally and the lack of adequate government policies that seek to address rather than react to the pandemic, many countries such as the United States and China have resorted to instituting lockdowns and curfews. Sri Lanka is a key example of a country where the implementation of a lockdown, resulting in the shuttering of important political institutions that are responsible for holding government accountable, has unfortunately accelerated the progress of the authoritarian agenda there. Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaska has ramped up efforts to control unfavourable speech by arresting anyone who criticizes or contradicts the national pandemic narrative/national response.¹ Additionally, according to a report from the Freedom house, “Early elections were called but, as the outbreak accelerated, were postponed, leaving the national legislature out of session beyond the constitutional deadline and weakening checks on executive power.”²

Aside from the specific case of Sri Lanka, there have been increasing reports that health/pandemic related concerns were being exploited by authorities as a pretext for human rights abuses, especially against ethnic and religious minorities. China’s model of government has historically used nationalist propaganda to drown out calls for transparency and accountability, while cracking down on individuals both domestically and internationally that share information contradictory to the national narrative. Covid-19 as a pandemic has unfortunately created a situation where citizens attempting to protest new bills/laws on the grounds of unconstitutionality and anti-democracy will be arrested without opportunity for appeal.

¹ <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20201216-freedom-another-casualty-of-covid-19-pandemic>

² <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/democracy-under-lockdown>

As a country that prides itself on the strength of government and integrity within the democratic process, it is the responsibility of the Canadian government and their international counterparts with strong democratic institutions to create mechanisms that strengthen the measures used to hold political leaders responsible for their actions. Particularly during crises, due to the urgency created by the novel pandemic situation, measures that are typically in place to regulate the executive powers of the political leadership are often skipped over with the line of urgency. Furthermore, even the Canadian government has restricted public access to parliament and legislative assemblies at the provincial and national levels, present a barrier to access and advocacy for lobbyists and the average Canadian citizen.³ Public trust in governmental institutions has eroded internationally because of the extensive news coverage on dodgy governments refusing to disclose information related to the health care system, to executive level members of parliament violating national covid policies to travel during the holidays. Canada has fared better in comparison to some of these nations, but more must be done to ensure the strength of democracy even in an increasingly digital world.

³ <https://biv.com/article/2021/01/covid-takes-toll-canadas-democracy-information-flow-slows-experts>