**Is Authoritarian Response to Covid19 Superior?**

From early December 2019 to March 2020, in merely more than three months, the World has witnessed an epic spreading and destruction of the coronavirus which originated in Wuhan, China. The collapse of healthcare system and the economic consequences that follow have few modern equivalences. We are in a pivotal point of modern human history and the governance decisions we make today will leave wide ranging ripples across in economic, social and political life.

When it comes to the tradeoff between security and freedom, many would choose the former especially in times of fear. The grand bargain of authoritarian regimes relies on the basis of this tradeoff: citizens will tolerate lesser freedoms, but will receive greater security against external threats, real or imagined. Both the Chinese and the Russians have claimed victories, or relative ones, and both celebrated their responses and outcomes as confirmation of their political superiority. A recent commentary in [Bloomberg](https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-03-17/coronavirus-is-making-china-s-model-look-better-and-better) suggested that the Chinese model of containment is superior to the democratic one. Another article by [CNN](https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/21/europe/putin-coronavirus-russia-intl/index.html) mused how Russia with a population of 146 million has less coronavirus cases than Luxembourg. Yet another article by CNN praised the [“success of China’s sweeping, top-down efforts to control the virus”](https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/19/asia/coronavirus-covid-19-update-china-intl-hnk/index.html). A [National Review article](https://www.nationalreview.com/2020/03/coronavirus-and-the-clash-of-civilizations/) concludes that “for the time being, China seems to be ahead in the geopolitical game.”

China, Russia and Iran have also started to seed the rumors that it is the Americans (the enemy) who have planted the virus, and a few (presumably out of line) Chinese diplomats, ironically, used social media banned in China (Twitter) to spread this message globally. Any reference to a Chinese virus is a form of racism (although the Spanish Flu, West Nile virus, MERS and other diseases have been historically and rightly so referred to by the country or area of origin). Indeed the Chinese Communist Party’s confidence appears to be at all time high: its relentless self-promotion has gone so far as from asking the Wuhan, Hubei people, who suffered the most from its coverup, to thank the party for saving them and the city, publishing a book entitled “The Great State’s Disease War” to sing Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party for their heroic and yet to come victory against the virus. Both Presidents Putin (Russia) and Xi (China) were proud to tout the results of having it under control, and the numbers presented support their claims. The CCP and its internet army has waged a propaganda war to showcase the world the superiority of the party in fighting the virus and its generous help to the world.

We are concerned with the false assumption that dictatorships provide a more effective response to crises, such as a novel virus. Dictatorships offer an inferior response to human safety, an area in which they are supposed to excel in relation to liberal democracies. The Achilles heel is that nobody believes the data coming out of China or Russia because data is routinely politicized, manipulated and controlled. The governance of authoritarian regimes distorts data and puts innocent lives at risk. A bigger danger might be that those outside believe that the approach of authoritarianism is superior and will, thus, endorse it (as the WHO has done) or worse, adopt it.

After the 2003 SARS outbreak in China, the CCP spent about $100 million to set up “the largest system in the world” for a “[direct-reporting network for infectious diseases and sudden public health events.](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/7GtP__eUyn3GiULmA2olYg)” The party promised that using the system, any doctor at the lowest level may directly report signs of disease outbreak to the central government in real time. If that was true, then the late Dr. Li Wenliang, who was arrested for warning his family and friends about the virus and subsequently was killed by the virus, should have been able to use the system to directly alert the central government of the outbreak. Why did it not work that way?

To answer this question, we need to get into the details on how the Chinese communist party (CCP) is founded and run. The party is founded on communists’ conviction that they are the only one that knows the destiny of humankind, and they have the mission to lead humankind to reach that destiny—communism. Unlike democracy in which officials are elected by voters, the legitimacy of the communist party’s rule comes from the use of violent force and its always correctness, which requires it to censor all criticism and deprives people of their voting power. The central government appoints the heads of provinces, who in turn appoints the head of cities. In such a system, officials of every level only answer to the officials of upper levels. They all serve the most important goal of the party: keeping it in absolute power. To get promoted, an official must keep his/her superior happy, only tells the boss good news, and suppresses anything, decisively, that may cause instability, such as outbreak of diseases. The fact that Dr. Li’s reprimand for “spreading rumors” was broadcast on China Central TV shows that the central government was aware of his warning and ordered to silence him.

Because the CCP censors all and deletes any unflattering information, we do not know the whole truth behind the coverup. Limited reports show that when some doctors wanted to report the outbreak, their superiors warned them to be [“cautious in reporting](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/7GtP__eUyn3GiULmA2olYg)”. In the CCP’s system, that warning is serious—a subordinate not heeding to a warning from the superior could end up like the late Dr. Li.

In a democracy, a locally elected official must responsible to the people who elected him/her, or else lose his/her job. Thus, if there is a new fast-spreading disease, he/she must quickly react to protect his constituencies by letting the world know so that his people and region can get help. While democracies are not immune to complacency or incompetence, they do have one feature that authoritarians do not: accountability to the people.

Latest bits of information leaked from China indicate that the CCP’s effort to achieve [“zero cases”](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-23/wuhan-still-finding-symptom-free-virus-cases-caixin-reports) may not be so successful as it claimed. [One report](https://www.ntdtv.com/gb/2020/03/22/a102805720.html)—which has been repeatedly deleted by the CCP and re-posted by ordinary people—detailed a patient being rejected by several hospitals in Wuhan, Hubei (where the outbreak originated), in order for them to maintain their “zero cases” records—due to the pressure from the higherups for the propaganda purpose. Beijing and Shanghai, along with some other regions, [bar Hubei/Wuhan people](http://www.rfi.fr/cn/%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD/20200322-%E6%B9%96%E5%8C%97%E4%BA%BA%E5%88%AB%E8%BF%9B%E4%BA%AC-%E9%A3%9E%E6%9C%BA%E8%AF%B7%E7%BB%95%E8%A1%8C-%E5%8C%97%E4%BA%AC%E4%BD%A0%E6%80%8E%E4%B9%88%E5%95%A6) who are officially cleared of the virus, because the authorities of other regions know too well that the “zero cases” claim by Hubei/Wuhan is not true.

Bad data from China has put others at risk as well, as no one actually knows exactly how many were tested, discovered, treated, died or healed, rendering the best of epidemiological models useless at best, misleading at worst. Russians’ trust in their government is also low, with a history of lies, mismanagement and coverups: Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe (1986), HIV/IDS epidemic (1980s), and now the coronavirus. One Russian doctor suggested that when Covid19 passes the border to Russia, it changes identify to the common flu, acute respiratory infection, or pneumonia. WHO said Russia is doing a good job, according to [CNN](https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/21/europe/putin-coronavirus-russia-intl/index.html). Sure enough, when they cover up information or shut down cities, authoritarians are decisive. The purpose: remain in power and protect the authoritarian’s absolute rule at any costs. Anyone who dares to challenge can face the wrath of the government and the brainwashed masses it directs.

Democracies, too, will chose health and wellbeing over economics, but with less of the political costs and less casualty in the price of personal freedom. There are no internet police who will threaten citizens and their families for posting their illness and seeking help. Regular police will not forcefully evacuate them from their homes or board them in. And, the government will not sacrifice the interest of the people to benefit its own propaganda. Most importantly, free media, who is protected by the law, will also criticize and put a check on the executive branch, in addition to the judges and the law makers.

Many people in mature democracies listen to authoritarians, whose voice is broadcasted freely in our media, and express envy and preference for their political response. These people are victims of propaganda and misinformed influential parrots. When praising authoritarian responses to novel crises, think twice. What would be the cost to society if the surveillance state took over and our freedoms disappeared in the name of “safety”?

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