

Can Populism Survive COVID-19?

Written by Bruno Theodoro Luciano

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/05/08/can-populism-survive-covid-19/>

BRUNO THEODORO LUCIANO, MAY 8 2020

Populist leaders across the globe have been contesting the global responses and recommendations from the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the scientific community on the covid-19 pandemic. From Donald Trump's criticism of the performance of the WHO in the pandemic to Brazil's regular anti-lockdown protests, populist governments have framed the pandemic according to their usual tactics of rejecting the role of the elites (intellectual/scientific in this case) and international institutions in global governance. Considering the performance of political leaders regarding the pandemic and their erratic attitudes across the world in that matter, I point out in this article how populist governments across the globe are reacting to the global covid-19 pandemic, contributing to the debate on the effects of this global crisis to the rise and survival of populist governments.

The covid-19 pandemic has impacted the strategies of political survival of populist leaders, who have perceived the covid-19 pandemic as both a challenge to their domestic support and a window of opportunity to seize more executive powers and undermine democratic institutions and international organisations. While recent polls have indicated an increase of public opinion support to governments which are leading strong responses to the pandemic, it has also suggested a decrease of public support for populist leaders who have resisted in adopting WHO recommendations on the covid-19 pandemic, especially when contrasted to state governors and mayors who are following the position of the scientific community and have seen their popularity rise. These trends have shown that the population has been strongly in favour of severe measures to handle the health crisis such as the introduction of quarantines and temporary lockdowns, despite their negative impacts to the economy.

Overall, populist leaders have rejected these measures not only due to their economic setbacks, but also because these recommendations have been put forward by their traditional 'enemies' – the 'elites', the scientific community and international organisations. Therefore, the first reactions of populist governments were to overlook the warnings of health organisations regarding the spread and lethality of the virus and to avoid movement restrictions and social distancing instructions to the population.

For instance, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has avoided a national lockdown, despite the country's rising number of cases. Mexican President López Obrador organised rallies in the first weeks of the epidemic in the country, hugging and kissing supporters despite the concerns of health authorities. Likewise, Bolsonaro continues to join in protests against lockdown measures in Brazil, despite the soaring of COVID-19 cases in the country, which has recently reached the top 6 in death numbers.

Nonetheless, the rise of the number of covid-19 cases and fatalities as well as the increased public support to restrictive measures have inevitably changed the posture of some populist governments. This is strikingly observed in the US, as the latest developments in the country have changed Trump's initial approach towards the pandemic, issuing a national emergency declaration and closing US borders as extreme measures to control the pandemic.

On the other hand, some populist leaders have been seizing this moment of global health crisis to either gain executive powers in their countries or challenge the legitimacy of domestic institutions, such as parliaments, supreme courts and the mainstream media. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has succeeded in approving a political reform which has given additional powers to the executive, allowing the government to indefinitely rule by decree. This move has in practice undermined democratic institutions and aggravated Hungary's autocratisation path.

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The government of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines has responded to the covid-19 pandemic by gaining emergency powers and increasing the level of repression towards its population, leading to the arrest of protesters, journalists and human rights activists. In the meantime, in Brazil President Bolsonaro has been rallying protests which have called for the shutdown of Brazilian institutions such as the Congress and Supreme Court, besides praising the country's military dictatorship from the 1960 to 1980s.

The instrumentalisation of crises is not a novel approach by populists. In fact, the contemporary rise of populism has been grounded in the context of the economic and financial crisis of 2008 and the surge of migration and refugee flows due to the aftermaths of the Arab Spring and unrest in countries such as Libya and Syria. Likewise during the past turmoil, the new covid-19 crisis has brought a new opportunity to be further explored by these actors, who not only desire to seize power in their countries, but also to erode domestic and international institutions which may contest their policies and legitimacy.

In sum, populists are addressing the pandemic as both a challenge and opportunity for their political survival. While traditional tactics of populism such as overlooking evidence-based policies and the recommendations of international organisations have lost strength due to the pandemic's devastating effects, this juncture also provided a momentum that enables populist leaders prone to employ authoritarian practices to increase their executive powers and challenge democratic institutions and international organisations. Understanding how these actors have performed in times of pandemic is essential in order to protect domestic and global norms/institutions from authoritarian threats.

About the author:

Bruno Theodoro Luciano is a Teaching Fellow in Public Policy and European Studies at the Department of Politics and International Studies (PAIS), University of Warwick, and holds a PhD in Political Science and International Studies from the University of Birmingham, United Kingdom. He has research experience in comparative regionalism, inter-regionalism and regional integration, with particular focus on the European Union, South American and African regionalisms. He is currently developing research on populism in Europe and Latin America and its impact on the political and trade relations between the two regions.