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Global Systemic Risk

July 24, 2020

COVID-19 and Polity: Crises and Democratic Backsliding

Introduction:

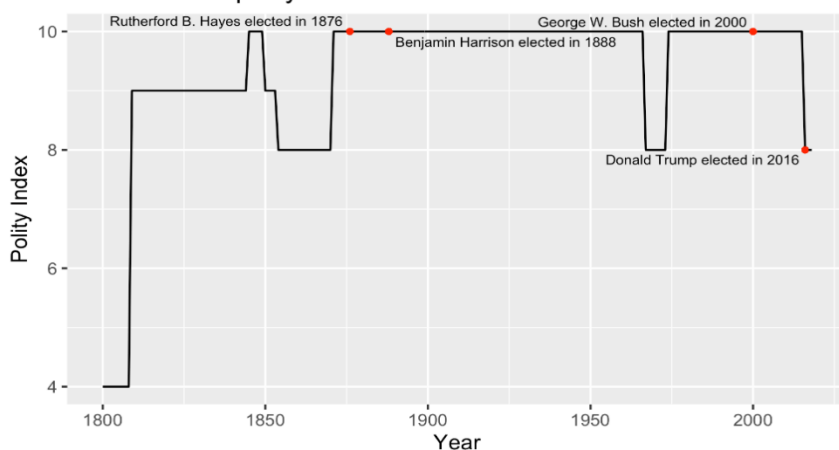
In this study, we compare high and low COVID-19 cases per capita in the United States, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Cyprus, and South Sudan and evaluate how the pandemic has affected authoritarian trends. By examining the respective polity scores of aforementioned states, we record how states responded to contemporary conflicts. Using this information and current events, we then extrapolate and assign polity scores for 2019 and 2020. We then offer various policy recommendations which the international community may take in order to address movements towards democratization and/or away from autocracy

Comparison: Four countries, each with varying levels of Covid-19 cases per capita, and looking for ways in which this pandemic has impacted polity within these countries, whether in their unfit response or subsequent crises.

<u>state Comparison</u>		Polity (2018)	
		<i>High</i>	<i>Low</i>
COVID	<i>High</i>	1. United States	2. Iran
	<i>Low</i>	3. Cyprus	4. South Sudan

Case 1 (High Polity, High Covid-19)

United States polity index between 1800 and 2018



Cases): United States

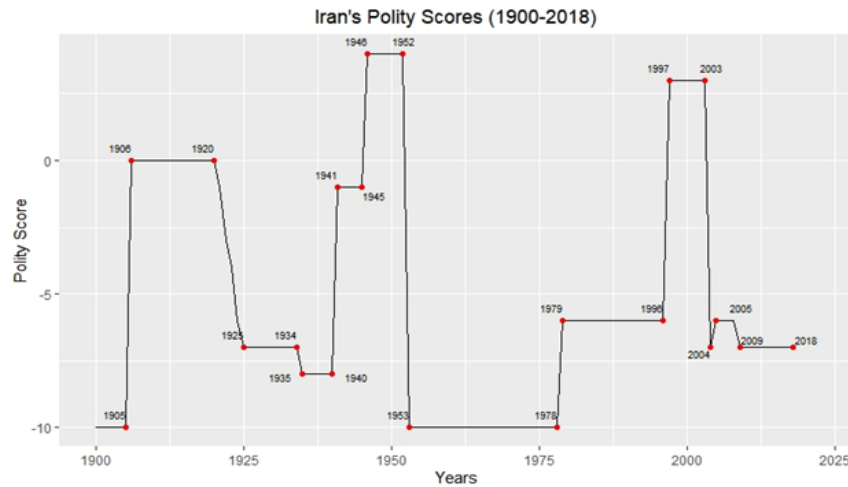
For the majority of its history, the United States has been deemed a “full democracy” with a polity score of ten but in 2016 its score dropped to eight after a two-point decrease in its democracy score (democ). Upon taking a closer look at how the Polity5: Dataset Users’ Manual calculates the democracy index, we found that the decrease came from what was deemed a “factional” degree of

Competitiveness of Political Participation (PARCOMP).¹ Prior to 2016, the US had a PARCOMP score of five meaning “competitive,” which added three points to its democracy score. From 2016 to 2018, the US received a PARCOMP score of three meaning “factional,” which adds only one point to its democracy score. We infer that this two-point decrease in democ and polity was triggered by the shocking outcome of the 2016 presidential election. This was the fourth time in history that the presidential candidate with the majority vote did not win the election, yet it was the first time that there was a subsequent decrease in the country’s polity score that same year.

Given that Donald Trump’s politics are highly racist and polarizing, his presidency has exacerbated a divide between Democrats and Republicans that has been widening for years. The Polity5 dataset has not been updated to include scores for 2019 but considering that Trump sustained the longest US government shut down in history, from December 22, 2018, to January 25, 2019, because Democrats in Congress refused to allocate 5.7 billion dollars to build his wall at the US-Mexico border it is unlikely that the US democracy and polity score increased that year.² In light of the Covid-19 pandemic and growing critique over the Trump administration’s response (or lack thereof), we can expect the US polity score to remain at eight or even decrease in 2020. The Pew Research Center released the results of a survey conducted amongst US adults between April 7th and April 12th of this year where they asked if respondents felt that divisions between Republicans and Democrats are increasing, decreasing, or staying the same. The survey found that 65 percent believe divides are increasing, 28 percent believe they are staying the same, and 7 percent believe they are decreasing.³ These results are then compared to the September 2019 responses where the results were 78 percent “increasing”, 16 percent “staying the same”, and 6 percent “decreasing.” This is indicative of consistently high levels of political division under the Trump administration,

and 93 percent of respondents felt that these have persisted or increased this year.⁴

The severity of the Covid-19 pandemic has increased exponentially since the Pew Research



Center conducted their survey, and we can expect a subsequent increase in political polarization. On April 12th, there were 529,951 cases in the US compared to the 3.83 million that have been reported as of July 21, 2020.⁵ Trump’s decisions amid the pandemic raise concerns about Constraint on Chief Executive (XCONST), another measure factored into the calculation of the country’s democ score. Trump has overly politicized the pandemic, therefore there is large skepticism over the administration’s decision to undermine the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and establish a contract between the Department of Health and Human Services and private company TeleTracking to collect and publish all Covid-19 data.⁶ Controversies like this one have also diverted attention from the use of militarized federal agents to suppress Black Lives Matter protest, notably in Portland, Oregon.⁷ We are forced to consider how Trump’s inability to slow the spread, privatization of Covid-19 data, and use of state-sanctioned violence Black Lives Matter protest will impact projections of the 2020 US polity score.

¹ Polity Project, Dataset Users’ Manual 1800-2018

² USA Today, “Trump signs measure to temporarily reopen government, setting up new battle over border wall,” by Michael Collins et al., January 27, 2019

³ The Pew Research, “Most Americans Say Trump Was Too Slow in Initial Response to Coronavirus Threat,” April 16, 2020^[37]

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Our World in Data, Coronavirus (COVID-19) Cases

⁶ Department of Health and Human Services, COVID-19 Guidance for Hospital Reporting and FAQs For Hospitals, Hospital Laboratory, and Acute Care Facility Data Reporting, July 10, 2020

⁷ USA Today, “What you need to know on the federal response in Portland and the legal questions it raises”, by Kevin Johnson et al., July 23, 2020.

Policy Recommendations regarding The United States

In the push back against democratic backsliding and rise of an authoritarian executive in the US, it is essential that the current administration strengthens its relationship with domestic and international health organizations and downsizes its police system. The legitimacy of public health professionals can be consolidated by reinstating the CDC as the primary collector and publisher of Covid-19 data and the reversal of the US withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO). Considering that withdrawal from the WHO requires a one year notice and receipt of the country's donation for this fiscal year⁸, boasting that the US has pulled out of the WHO and will no longer provide it with funding is clearly a political stunt. This is particularly alarming, for it promotes isolationist politics and the subversion of the legislative branch given that the donation to the WHO is congressionally allocated money. Similarly, on June 26th, 2020 Trump issued an executive order to deploy Department of Homeland Security agents to major cities to suppress public protest under the guise of "law and order."⁹ As of early July, there have been reports of federal law enforcement agents in unidentifiable military uniforms and unmarked vans abducting protesters in Portland, Oregon.¹⁰ We recommend, with urgency, that police and federal defense agents are immediately withdrawn from public protest and that steps be taken to demilitarize and defund the police force. Here Trump is clearly testing the limits of his executive power, especially over the use of defense, and any infringement on the 1st amendment right to freedom of speech and protest is indicative of democratic backsliding and the rise of an authoritarian executive.

Case 2 (Low Polity, High COVID-19): The Islamic Republic of Iran

⁸ Just Security, "Trump's Empty "Withdrawal" from the World Health Organization", by Harold Hongju Koh, May 30, 2020

⁹ The White House, Executive Order on Protecting American Monuments, Memorials, and Statues and Combating Recent Criminal Violence, June 26, 2020

¹⁰ National Public Radio, "Federal Officers Use Unmarked Vehicles To Grab People In Portland, DHS Confirms," July 17, 2020

Events Legend:

1905: Persian Constitutional Revolution

1920: Preparations for 1921 coup d'etat

1925: Beginning of Pahlavi Dynasty

1935: End of Pahlavi Dynasty

1941: Anglo-Soviet Invasion of Iran

1946: Azerbaijan Crisis

1953: Iranian coup d'etat

1978: Black Friday massacre by Pahlavi military kills 88 people

1979: Iranian (Islamic) Revolution

1996: U.S. imposes economic sanction on Iran

1997: Reformist Mohammad Khatami elected President

2003: Iran agrees to IAEA inspections

2004: Islamic conservatives gain the majority of legislative seats in election

2005: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad elected President

2009: Presidential election protests regarding

Ahmadinejad's re-election and voting irregularities

The Islamic Republic of Iran first announced confirmed cases of the novel Coronavirus, COVID-19, on February 19 after two individuals were declared dead after being infected by the disease in the city of Qom.¹¹ The Holy City, a place of pilgrimage for Shia Muslim, would become the epicenter of Iran's outbreak as well as an early site of mass graves. While Tehran was slow to acknowledge the virus' arrival, lawmakers in Qom were quick to accuse the national leadership of dishonesty in death and infection rate reporting.¹²

Five days after Tehran's recognition of COVID-19, the mortality rate was reported to be 25 percent.¹³ This was reported to have decreased to 7.8 percent in March (still higher than the estimated world average of 3.4 percent as determined by the World Health Organization).¹⁴ The fact that Iran's leadership has reported a higher deaths-to-infection rate compared to other states has led to suspicion regarding the true rate of infection. Iran's mismanagement has proven to be fatal not only for its own citizens, but also for others in the greater Middle East, as ninety percent of cases in the region have been traced back to the Islamic Republic.¹⁵

¹¹ Nada, Garrett. "Timeline: Iran's Death Toll from COVID-19." *The Iran Primer*, March 25, 2020.

<https://iranprimer.usip.org/index.php/blog/2020/mar/25/timeline-irans-death-toll-covid-19>.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Nada, Garrett. "Timeline: Iran's Death Toll from COVID-19." *The Iran Primer*, March 25, 2020.

<https://iranprimer.usip.org/index.php/blog/2020/mar/25/timeline-irans-death-toll-covid-19>

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Sadjadpour, Karim. *Iran's Coronavirus Disaster*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 25, 2020.

Some researchers believe that the reported number of cases represent only one fifth of actual confirmed cases; on March 23rd, the U.S. Department of State supported this belief, though relations between Washington and Tehran could have influenced the desire to discredit Rouhani and the Ayatollah.¹⁶ While Tehran traced COVID-19's arrival to Qom to an Iranian merchant who visited Wuhan and a Chinese student attending a seminary in the Holy City, the Commander of the Revolutionary Guard, Brigadier General Hossein Salami, blamed the U.S. for producing the virus as a biological attack.¹⁷ In framing COVID as a national security issue rather than a health issue, the Ayatollah appointed an IRGC commander, and not a physician, to lead the state's Health Command Center.¹⁸

Despite Iran being hit heavily, the state's response has been unusually passive. The Islamic Republic's dependence on China led to it initially dismissing the suspension of travel to its ally in eastern Asia.¹⁹ The delayed recognition of COVID's arrival has been attributed to the need to ensure participation in the parliamentary elections in February in which conservatives dramatically won the majority (and which have been suspected of being rigged) despite demonstrating the lowest turnout since the 1979 Revolution.²⁰ On March 5th, Iran closed all schools and universities, though the Holy City was not placed under quarantine at that time.²¹ In fact, religious centers across the Islamic Republic, such as mosques and shrines, remained

open until April.²² On March 3rd, Ayatollah Khamenei described how "COVID-19 is not such a big tragedy and this country has overcome graver ones," and that "the prayers of the pure youth and pious are very effective in repelling major tragedies."²³ This is in comparison to a comment made by President Rouhani on March 4th in which he claimed that "almost" all of Iran's provinces had seen COVID cases.²⁴

The lack of the state's response is noteworthy, as it could largely be attributed to the strained relationship between the state and civil society in the past year. In November of 2019, protests erupted across Iran after Tehran announced an increase in oil prices due, in part, to the sanctions by the U.S. and the Trump administration's Maximum Pressure campaign.²⁵ The protests, in which 180-450+ people were killed in four days and 7,000 were detained, were the deadliest since the 1979 Revolution.²⁶

On January 3rd, the United States assassinated IRGC General Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad.²⁷ The General was respected by those from both the right and left and his targeted assassination led to great unity across Iran, as demonstrated by his funeral procession, which largely favored the Islamic Republic's leadership following the recent protests. This, however, was largely short lived, as Iran shot down Ukrainian International Airlines flight PS752 on January 8th, killing all 176 people onboard.²⁸ To the further frustration of Iranians, Tehran waited until January 11th to assume responsibility for the tragic

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/25/iran-s-coronavirus-disaster-pub-81367>.

¹⁶ Nada, Garrett. "Timeline: Iran's Death Toll from COVID-19." *The Iran Primer*, March 25, 2020.

<https://iranprimer.usip.org/index.php/blog/2020/mar/25/timeline-irans-death-toll-covid-19>.

¹⁷ Sadjadpour, Karim. *Iran's Coronavirus Disaster*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 25, 2020.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/25/iran-s-coronavirus-disaster-pub-81367>.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁹ Daragahi, Borzou. "Separating Fact from Fiction and Fate: Assessing Iran's Response to COVID-19." Atlantic Council. Last modified April 2, 2020. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/separating-fact-from-fiction-and-fate-assessing-irans-response-to-covid-19/>.

²⁰ Daragahi, Borzou. "Separating Fact from Fiction and Fate: Assessing Iran's Response to COVID-19." Atlantic Council. Last modified April 2, 2020. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/separating-fact-from-fiction-and-fate-assessing-irans-response-to-covid-19/>.

²¹ Middle East Eye. "Coronavirus: Iran closes down schools and universities as death toll rises." *Middle East Eye*, March 5, 2020. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-iran-closed-schools-universities-death-toll-rises>.

²² *Ibid*.

²³ Sadjadpour, Karim. *Iran's Coronavirus Disaster*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 25, 2020.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/25/iran-s-coronavirus-disaster-pub-81367>.

²⁴ Dehghanpisheh, Babak. "Coronavirus has spread to nearly all Iran provinces: president." Reuters, March 4, 2020.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-iran-rouhani/coronavirus-has-spread-to-nearly-all-iran-provinces-president-idUSKBN20R1ES>.

²⁵ Fassihi, Farnaz, and Rick Gladstone.

"<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/01/world/middleeast/iran-protests-deaths.html?auth=login-google>." *The New York Times*, December 1, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/01/world/middleeast/iran-protests-deaths.html?auth=login-google>.

²⁶ *Ibid*.

²⁷ BBC. "Qasem Soleimani: Stampede kills 50 mourners at burial in Iran." *BBC News*, January 7, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51015795>.

²⁸ BBC. "Iran plane crash: Ukrainian jet was 'unintentionally' shot down." *BBC News*, January 10, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51073621>.

accident.²⁹ As a result, the Republic's regime greatly lost legitimacy which it has been desperate to regain. So desperate, in fact, that it has been reluctant to respond to Iran's newest threat: COVID-19.

Rather than enforcing firm regulations, Tehran's leadership focused on social mediums to promote quarantine. President Rouhani, elected in 2013 and re-elected in 2017 as a moderate, is suspected to be largely behind this back-seat strategy. He has supported a passive response, members of the IRGC, who were the aggressors in the protests, have called for a more stringent COVID-19 response.

On the days leading up to Nowruz, the Persian New Year, which took place between March 20th and 23rd, markets were bustling as people were preparing for the festivity with little health regulations reducing the spread of the virus.³⁰ Surprisingly, however, the people of Iran have been supporting the IRGC's call for stronger protective measures.³¹ Nonetheless, the response has been weak. As a result, civil society has taken the lead. Small and local factories have begun manufacturing their own masks to distribute, women have taken to the streets to sanitize public spaces and high-frequencies surfaces such as telephones and benches, and the Medical University Hospitals have employed their regional structure to respond to the pandemic.³²

Upon realizing this self-sufficiency, we must watch the power dynamics between the people of Iran and Tehran's leadership and clergy.

Policy Recommendations regarding Iran

To best address this pandemic and the potential for democratic backsliding, the people of Iran must continue to protect the role of civil society. As it becomes more aware of its capacity in self-reliance beyond the state, Tehran will likely seek to weaken civil society's organization. Iranians must continue to cry-out and the international community must be prepared to listen to and protect

these voices. As a result, the international community should continue to invest in independent media in Iran. It must also protect access to the internet and condemn blackouts, such as those imposed during the November 2019 protests and the height of COVID transmission in Iran.³³

Because strides towards authoritarianism by the regime will target this structure, the international system should continue to support and safeguard this health system which has been lauded by the WHO. Regarding its health structure, Iran must re-appoint the leader of the Health Command Center, who is currently an IRGC commander, to a physician.

Lastly, the international community should be careful not to alienate The Islamic Republic of Iran. This imposed isolation will continue to push Iran to stronger relations with Russia and China, two states which have demonstrated a desire to undermine the international system as it stands. Due to the Maximum Pressure campaign by the United States, Iran was quick to refuse any help coming from the U.S. for fear that it may be used against them.³⁴ Instead, Iran hosted a team of Chinese experts in February to help combat the spread of the virus.³⁵

With the U.S. sanctions leading to inflation, the drop in oil prices, and the economic stagnation produced by COVID-19, Iran was forced to request an IMF loan for the first time since the Revolution in 1979.³⁶ The \$5 billion loan, however, is expected to be blocked by the Trump Administration.

³³ Al-Jazeera. "After internet blackout, Iranians take stock." Al-Jazeera, November 27, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/ajimpact/internet-blackout-iranians-stock-191126142459371.html>.

³⁴ Al-Jazeera. "Iran leader refuses US help; cites coronavirus conspiracy theory." Al-Jazeera, March 24, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/iran-leader-refuses-cites-coronavirus-conspiracy-theory-200322145122752.html>.

³⁵ Rasmussen, Sune E., and Aresu Egbali. "China Sends Team to Aid Iranian Response to Surging Coronavirus." *The Wall Street Journal*, February 29, 2020. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-sends-team-to-aid-iranian-response-to-surging-coronavirus-11582993100>.

³⁶ Talley, Ian, and Benoit Faucon. "U.S. to Block Iran's Request to IMF for \$5 Billion Loan to Fight Coronavirus." *The Wall Street Journal*, April 7, 2020. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-to-block-irans-request-to-imf-for-5-billion-loan-to-fight-coronavirus-11586301732>.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

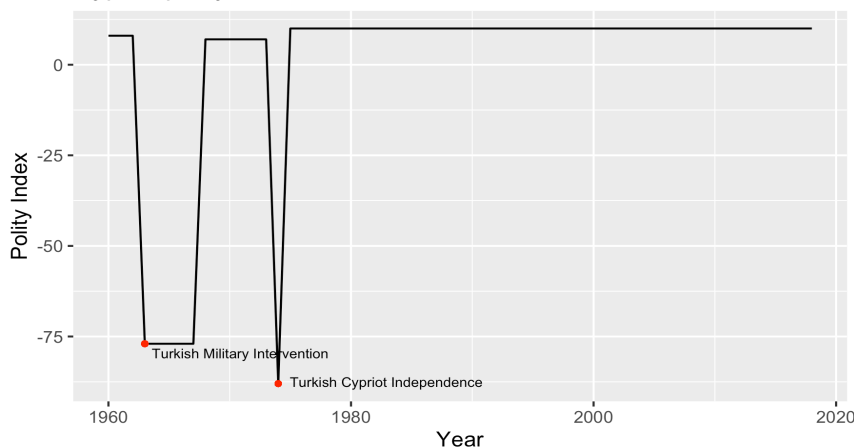
³⁰ Cameron, David, Ana De La O, Tais Gasparian, Vish Sakthivel, Nahid Siamdoust, Aniko Szucs, and Taisu Zhang. "Democracy and Rise of Authoritarianism in COVID-19 World." *The MacMillan Center*. April 24, 2020. <https://macmillan.yale.edu/news/democracy-and-rise-authoritarianism-covid-19-world>.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

Case 3 (High Polity, Low Covid-19 Cases): Cyprus

Cyprus polity index between 1800 and 2018



Cyprus has had a high polity level in the last 50 years suggesting decades of stability and democratic success, barring the period around its independence and the Turkish invasion of the island in 1974.³⁷ Due to compulsory voting procedures in Cyprus, the country has always had a high voter participation in elections and the small populace – the country has 1.17 million inhabitants – are active in their political sphere.³⁸ However, inner fragmentation of the country makes a case against this image of democratic stability.³⁹ The Republic of Cyprus has been an island divided – with a Greek Cypriot majority and a Turkish Cypriot minority – since the Turks invaded in 1974 to prevent the island from Greek annexation.⁴⁰ Cyprus has high levels of fragmentation – alluding to a government’s inability to control the entirety of its territory – due to these ethnic divisions that have transformed into a political conflict. While this is an aspect of polity that has only been measured by the Polity Project since the year 2000 – which prevents us from analyzing the rise in Cyprus’ fragmentation since the Turkish invasion – it is clear that, due to the establishment of Northern Cyprus, governed by the Turkish Cypriots with the support of the Turkish government, the Republic of Cyprus and the Greek Cypriots do not have complete territorial control.⁴¹

Dialogue between both sides to quell tensions and reunify the islands have occurred multiple times in the last forty years and yet, talks have never led to the productive settling of the conflict and the reunification of the island.⁴² These negotiations were sponsored and moderated by the United Nations and were successful at least in its advocacy for the suspension of conflict in the beginning with the establishment of a ceasefire and a buffer zone controlled by the United Nations named the ‘Green Line’, which effectively split the island and its capital in two.⁴³ Although the tensions between the Greek and Turkish Cypriots have not improved, in the past decade more talks between all interested parties have occurred but these were suspended in 2017 with the hope of restarting in the future.⁴⁴ Without the continuation of these dialogues, Cyprus runs into the possibility of ‘state failure’, because a country’s inability to control its populace and territory could lead to the detriment of the country’s governance structures and heightens insecurity for its citizens.⁴⁵

³⁷ Polity Project, Dataset Users’ Manual 1800-2018.

³⁸ The Commonwealth. “Cyprus : Constitution and Politics | The Commonwealth,” accessed July 24, 2020.

³⁹ Polity Project, Dataset Users’ Manual 1800-2018.

⁴⁰ Kambas, Michele. 2020. “As Coronavirus Lockdown Eases, Cypriots Still in Limbo,” *Reuters*, May 6, 2020.

⁴¹ Polity Project, Dataset Users’ Manual 1800-2018.

⁴² The Commonwealth. “Cyprus: Constitution and Politics | The Commonwealth,” accessed July 24, 2020.

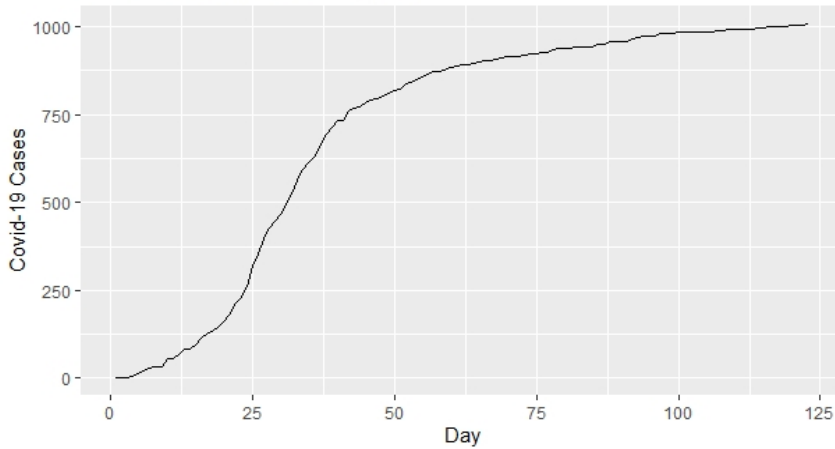
⁴³ Gokcekus, et al. 2012. “Impediments to Trade Across the Green Line in Cyprus: Classic Barriers and Mistrust.” *Journal of Peace Research* 49 (6): 863–72.

⁴⁴ Harding, Luke. 2020. “Turkish Cypriot Leader Warns Cyprus Is Facing Permanent Partition,” *The Guardian*, February 6, 2020, sec. World news.

⁴⁵ Polity Project, Dataset Users’ Manual 1800-2018.

However, with Covid-19 complicating their current circumstances this seems less likely. Although the country had a relaxed viewpoint

Covid-19 Case Rise in Cyprus



towards the start of the pandemic, once it had its first cases, restrictions became aggressive and the country started to shut down, instituting curfews, national border closures, and instituting lockdowns that prevent Cypriots from crossing between the Greek side and the Turkish side.⁴⁶ The closure of the ‘Green Line’ caused economic and health hardships for many Greek and Turkish Cypriots alike since they depended on businesses on both sides to subsist. Additionally, once limitations began lifting on June 8th reports have surfaced stating that the authorities from the Republic of Cyprus have prevented the Turkish Cypriots, tourists, and third-country nationals residing in Northern Cyprus to freely move between the two halves of Cyprus.⁴⁷

Aside from these actions being unlawful due to the United Nations being the sole manager of the ‘Green Line’, this discriminatory prevention of free movement signals an increase in tensions between both ethnic groups because of Covid-19. This would heighten pre-existent fragmentation and could lead

⁴⁶ Kambas, Michele. 2020. “Crossing Points on Divided Cyprus Will Gradually Open from June 8,” *Reuters*, accessed July 24, 2020; Kambas, Michele. 2020. “As Coronavirus Lockdown Eases, Cypriots Still in Limbo,” *Reuters*, accessed July 24, 2020; Kambas, Michele and Darren Butler. 2020. “Coronavirus Shuts Cyprus Hospital, Schools after Doctor Tests Positive,” *Reuters*, March 10, 2020; Kambas, Michele. 2020. “Cyprus Imposes Night-Time Curfew, Extending Coronavirus Lockdown,” *Reuters*, accessed July 24, 2020.

⁴⁷ Andreou, Evie. 2020. “Coronavirus: Turkish Cypriot Businesses Criticise Tourist Crossing Ban,” *Cyprus Mail*, accessed July 24, 2020; Apelblat, M. 2020. “Cyprus More Divided during the Pandemic,” *The Brussels Times*, accessed July 24, 2020; “Protesters Decry Cyprus Crossing Point Closures over Virus,” *AP News*, accessed July 24.

to a decreased polity score and cause state failure and democratic backsliding. Since Covid-19 has physically isolated both portions of the island, talks of reunification seem even less of a possibility to leaders of both sides of the ‘Green Line’ and the sociocultural tensions between Turkish and Greek Cypriots deteriorate political efforts. Covid-19’s deepening of the separation between the Turkish-controlled and Greek-controlled halves of Cyprus, suggests that Covid-19 may be exacerbating current fragmentation into the permanent decay of dialogue and cease reunification efforts, essential to the prevention of state failure.

Policy Recommendations regarding Cyprus

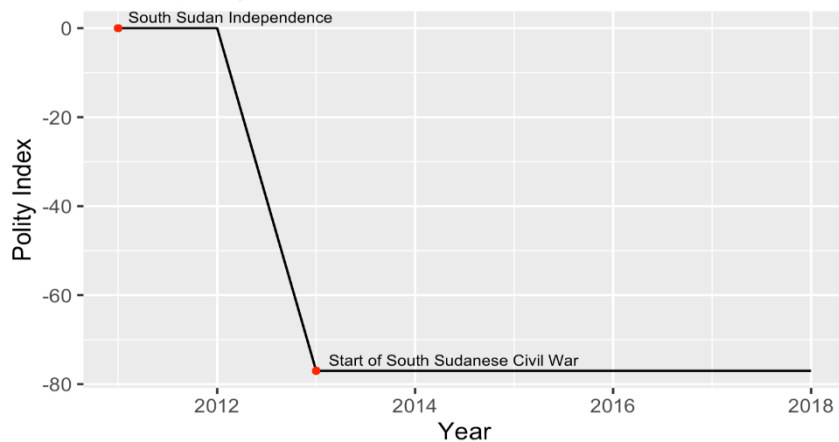
To prevent and regress the effects of fragmentation and democratic backsliding in Cyprus, certain initiatives and policies could help in the reunification of the island. The public must be educated on the funding mechanisms and infrastructures of civil society organizations (CSO) and non-governmental organizations (NGO). The Cypriot public is wary of CSOs and NGOs and consider them “artificial” and “externally driven” due to the uncertainty in their funding and their purposes in society.⁴⁸ Without these organizations, community-organizing efforts would not be possible and NGOs and CSOs would not be able to exert the necessary pressure on the Republic of Cyprus and Northern Cyprus for them to continue their dialogue. The increased transparency of these organizations will increase their legitimacy in the eyes of Cypriots from both sides and aid in the efforts of unification by fostering a sense of urgency in the matter and bolster dialogue between the two ethnic groups at the individual level. The combination of surge in CSO and NGO legitimacy with the organizations’ pressure for political and societal unification and the continuation of domestic consolidation of Cypriot territory will aid not only in the prevention of further democratic backsliding and fragmentation in the island but it will regress the effects fragmentation might have had on the state by bolstering sociopolitical unification.

Case 4 (Low Polity, Low Covid-19 Cases):

⁴⁸ Eisen et al. 2020. *The Democracy Playbook: Preventing and Reversing Democratic Backsliding*. Washington, D.C: The Brookings Institution, accessed July 24, 2020.

South Sudan

Sudan polity index between 1956 and 2018



For the first two years, after its independence, South Sudan held a polity score of two.⁴⁹ Every year since 2013, it has held a score of -77.⁵⁰ This score is a result of civil war made up of inter-communal violence ignited by the feud between President Kirr and his vice president Machar.⁵¹ -77 is an interregnum, which means a complete collapse of central political authority and a presence of internal factionalism. South Sudan also went from experiencing a score of zero fragmentation (no overt fragmentation)” to 3 since the civil war where the majority of the territory is effectively ruled by local authority.⁵² Although there have been many peace deals throughout the civil war, violence has persisted. In 2018, Machar was brought back from exile and in February of 2020, he was put back in his position as vice president. This was supposed to symbolize the forging of a unity government and “the end to the war”.⁵³

South Sudan has 2,211 confirmed cases and 45 deaths⁵⁴ and was one of the last countries in Africa to confirm a case. There are 15 functioning hospitals in total and four ventilators for its eleven million population.⁵⁵ South Sudan suffers from spatial inequality (accessibility) where many do not

live near health facilities.⁵⁶ Internal violence continues to threaten access to public health facilities as well. Vice President Machar, who heads the Covid-19 task force along with his wife and other cabinet members, yet they all have contracted the virus,⁵⁷ and no strategic health plan or infrastructure for care, treatment, or testing has been put in place. The lower case numbers for South Sudan reflect the inability to monitor the magnitude of the pandemic, and not the absence of the virus. Rather than call for an immediate end to the political standoff, President Kirr has imposed curfews, closed public gathering spaces, and has called for social distancing.⁵⁸

Community violence is still raging across the country, leading to competition for resources and increased fragmentation in leadership. On top of Covid-19, responses are still needed to address the hunger pandemic (which has been exacerbated by the closing of food markets), mass displacement, and locusts.⁵⁹ It is safe to infer that Covid-19 will likely maintain South Sudan's failed state position.

Policy Recommendations regarding South Sudan

South Sudan should professionalize a community health worker system as a way to amend spatial inequality would be to build a workforce of community health workers who could work within the village they live, and monitor/trace the virus. Beyond the pandemic, having a system of locally trained health workers could help make health an everyday property and not just of significance when someone has the ability to show up to a health facility. It should also allow local leadership to respond to the pandemic. Severe fragmentation does not allow for sustainable central authority to take the lead on mitigating Covid-19. Local authorities should be able to respond to needs first and make decisions based on the unique characteristics of their constituents. Beyond this pandemic, there

⁴⁹ Polity Project, Dataset Users' Manual 1800-2018

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Council on Foreign Relations, “Understanding the Roots of Conflict in South Sudan,” by Katherine Noel and Alex de Waal, September 14, 2016.

⁵² Polity Project, Dataset Users' Manual 1800-2018

⁵³ Reuters, “Now to end long suffering,” by Denis Dumo, February 22, 2020

⁵⁴ Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, Covid-19 World Map, 2020

⁵⁵ United Nations, “Covid-19 Potentially Greatest Threat to South Sudan's Already Fragile Health System, Special Representative Warns Security Council”, Press Release, June 23, 2020

⁵⁶ Geospat Health, “Spatial accessibility to basic public health services in South Sudan”, by Macharia et.al, May 11, 2017

⁵⁷ Aljazeera, “South Sudan's Reik Machar, wife test positive for coronavirus,” May 19, 2020

⁵⁸ Brookings, “Africa in the news: Burundi, Benin, South Sudan, and Covid-19 updates”, by Christina Golubski, May 23, 2020

⁵⁹ International Rescue Committee, “Covid-19 cases spike in South Sudan; IRC calls for end to political standoff inhibiting country's response, Press Release, June 2, 2020

should continue to be communication between local and central government at all times. However, choosing to allow fragmentation in the future might completely jeopardize the legitimacy of the central government in the long term, so an agreement might be helpful to move forward.

There should also be a call for the end of community violence with support from the international community if needed. President Kirr must enforce a standoff to allow for the distribution of resources and to ensure that as many people as possible have access to health facilities. Having a sustained peace agreement could also allow those who have been internally displaced to come back home. Lastly South Sudan should strive for a diversification of revenue. Due to collapsed oil revenues, it would be in South Sudan's best interest to diversify revenue to help build more funds for health infrastructure and a new job market for community health workers.

Policy Recommendations: Addressing Democratic Backsliding Around the World

Democratic backsliding and authoritarian trends occur in states beyond those mentioned in this case study. The following policy recommendations are designed to be applied, therefore, to the greater scope of affected states and citizenries.

As authoritarian regimes manipulate reports and employ misinformation, factual reporting is essential for measured responses and accountability. The international community must uphold, defend, and fund independent media; this is especially true as hybrid warfare replaces traditional strategies and false information is weaponized, thus making it a security issue. In addition, access to the internet must also be protected. When states fail to state the truth, individuals, such as journalists, have been known to respond with their own reporting by means of social media (e.g. reporting the Arab Spring). The internet has also served as a tool for organizing protests, which have been called Facebook Revolutions, that demand change. Without this access, blackouts can effectively silence entire states, thus posing a risk to good governance and free speech.

Democratization is largely contingent on the right to vote in free and fair elections. Conflict or other crippling events such as the COVID-19

Pandemic risk access to this right, which is usually negatively impacted by stringent quarantine regulations, the elimination of elections, and the general fear of transmission. The most vulnerable, such as the elderly and the poor who have compromised immune systems as a result of their living environment, are unproportionately impacted the most. By securing the right to vote by means of social distancing, establishing designated spaces and times for these vulnerable voters, the use of mail-in ballots, and public campaigns explaining the safety regulations which will keep them safe while they fill out their ballot, elections can safely be held. In order to ensure the validity, election monitoring must be employed as well.

While government structures shift their attention to addressing (or underestimating) the pandemic, state capture becomes an increasing risk to transparent governance. Companies who have closely worked with the state and which may have gained control of mechanisms within the state may manipulate their positions in order to gain greater influence and/or address the financial difficulties that they may be experiencing. The international community must monitor such companies, especially those belonging to the pharmaceutical industry and the medical equipment industry.

While business and states are facing economic difficulties due to the pandemic, organized crime has maintained wealth which could be used to bribe government leaders and manipulate elections. In addition, states' inability to address all the shortages caused by COVID-19 (especially those in sanctioned authoritarian states) has left many individuals in need of basic goods. Criminal organizations are likely to seek to satisfy the general populace's needs in order to gain their respect and support. Not only does this replace the state as provider, but it also reduces its legitimacy. While a loss in legitimacy of an authoritarian regime may seem like a positive occurrence, the replacement of said regime with a cartel or paramilitary group may be equally as dangerous.

When discussing legitimacy, it is also essential that the validity of the international system, especially health actors such as the WHO, is maintained. The international community must not allow sarcastic or negative rhetoric resulting from frustration to reduce the capacity of these actors. By undermining the international order as it

stands, a power vacuum is left to be filled by those seeking to replace it, such as the authoritarian regimes of China and Russia, which endangers global governance and the current, though imperfect, structures of accountability.

Lastly, the international system must address the role of sanctions during global catastrophes such as this pandemic. These sanctions, whose goals were initially to coerce benevolent responses and the adoption of democracy, are now leading to the opposite as governments shift the costs of the sanctions to their people. This has been exemplified in Iran, where U.S. sanctions on oil exports led to an increase in prices that triggered protests and an authoritarian response by the state in November of 2019. Likewise, the U.S.'s sanctioning of Sudan as a State Sponsor of Terrorism has led to Sudan's ineligibility to receive loans. The political unrest facing Sudan as a result of the burden of sanctions has also led to other states hesitance to lend the state aid in a time where only economic stability will gain the democratic transitional government legitimacy under Prime Minister Hamdok. The result has been continued unrest and the impending rise of Islamists who were left-over from Bashir's government. While the West watches, China and Russia have taken the opportunity to satisfy the needs of such states as Sudan, offering aid and support without the social, political, and economic conditions that are included within IMF, World Bank, and western states' loans. Not only is this dangerous for the international system and receiving states, but also for the interests of the West.

Conclusion

In our case study, we recognize that the COVID-19 Pandemic, like any other catastrophe, has the capacity to encourage and provide cover for democratic backsliding. However, the capacity of the state, rather than the effect of COVID, seems to me most influential. In the case of Iran, we see this demonstrated. As one of the counties with the highest rate of infection and a polity score of -7 (2018), there does not seem to be a clear association between the two variables. Though Iran has demonstrated clear and aggressive democratic backsliding in the past decade, the need to regain legitimacy has been more influential than the spread of the novel coronavirus. In the United States, where the spread is even higher, the capacity of the

state has been employed under the pandemic to participate in democratic backsliding.

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