

**Managing the Pandemic**  
**Authoritarian Responses to COVID-19**

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**Introduction**

The novel coronavirus has been a global health crisis, and it is one that states have responded to in a variety of ways. The pandemic has been welcomed by some authoritarian regimes as an impetus for further repression by imposing new restrictions on civil liberties, limiting protests, delaying elections, and introducing new mass surveillance techniques. Other than its ability to debilitate the world, one of the pandemic's legacies will be autocratic governments' dangerous expansion of power.<sup>1</sup> It is critical to note that not all authoritarian regimes have responded the same to COVID-19. On one level, authoritarian regimes have instituted increasing measures for repression in response to the outbreak of COVID-19, but adequate responses that stem the spread of the virus require some degree of open access to information for the public. Still, some authoritarian regimes have gone as far as to claim that COVID-19 does not exist within their borders. Like Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, some have denied the danger of the virus, claiming it to be a "psychosis" and advising citizens to fight against it by taking a traditional sauna or drinking vodka.<sup>2</sup> Still, some authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes such as Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Singapore, have effectively responded to the virus. Therefore, the question remains: why have some authoritarian regimes accurately reported COVID-19 numbers and remained transparent about their preventive measures while others obscured their numbers or deny the existence of the virus altogether?

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<sup>1</sup> Roth (2020).

<sup>2</sup> Ilyushina and Richeta (2020).

This paper argues that authoritarian reporting of COVID-19 numbers - i.e. the number of individuals confirmed to be infected - is driven by two factors. The first is whether or not the regime is competing against a strong or weak civil society, and the second is whether or not the population of a state is for some reason or another particularly vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus. Authoritarian states that were not as susceptible or worried about domestic unrest at the start of the virus's spread are predicted to be more likely to report accurate COVID-19 numbers than those that were worried about unrest or revolt. Additionally, the state can more easily silence a weak civil society than a strong one. A strong civil society can combat the power of the state, build parallel state institutions, or operate institutions independently of the will of the autocrat and their inner circle. In the case of a pandemic, this relies on the degree of freedom supplied to the press and, critically, the ability of the healthcare system to work independently of the autocrat.

Those that are more vulnerable to pandemics or more reliant on the international community are more likely to accurately represent the extent of the virus's spread within their borders. Sometimes, this is because they desire to cooperate with the international community; other times, it is due to the spread of the virus that occurs too quickly or spreads to a significant portion of the country that it becomes impossible to hide. We will be exploring this theory through two case studies that compare how the governments of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have handled the COVID-19 virus.

## **Literature Review**

The COVID-19 pandemic is both a global health crisis and a “parallel epidemic of authoritarian and repressive measures”.<sup>3</sup> There are two major explanations for why some authoritarian states are obscuring or denying the existence of COVID-19 cases. The first relates to

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<sup>3</sup> Gebrekidan (2020).

concrete concerns over state capabilities and the provision of state welfare. I.e. weak authoritarian regimes are more likely to lie about their case numbers in order to prevent domestic upheaval associated with their inability to respond to the virus. The second relates to signaling rather than actual capabilities: regardless of their true capacity, authoritarian regimes are hesitant to portray weakness to either their domestic or international audiences. In the early months of 2020, the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic was inextricably linked back to choices made by the Chinese government: specifically its lack of freedom of expression, censorship and rigid bureaucracy. This was made evident in the silencing of whistleblower Dr. Li Wenliang.<sup>4</sup> This dynamic is not wholly new to authoritarian regimes. Amartya Sen's 1981 piece introduces the vicious-cycle in which natural disasters and authoritarian governments feed off one another. According to Sen, natural catastrophes (famine is his case) occur due to lack of democratic governance and not to the lack of food.<sup>5</sup> Against traditional understanding, Sen found that famines are in fact more related to economic and political accountability rather than the availability of food. As such, due to free elections and governmental checks and balances, democracies are better equipped to deal with natural disasters than authoritarian regimes.

Accordingly in democracies, accountability forces governments to respond to their citizen's needs by equitably providing food and thus preventing famines. Democracies are accountable and indebted to their constituencies; constituents who, in turn, control leaders' continued access to power via elections. When looking at disasters like famine or disease, this puts increased pressure on politicians in democracies to alleviate grievances, while leaders under an autocratic government may be inclined to corruption and paying off their key allies as opposed to

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<sup>4</sup> Merieau (2020).

<sup>5</sup> Sen (1981).

alleviating the underlying cause of grievance.<sup>6</sup> By allowing freedom of speech and expression, democracies are capable of providing accurate information of ongoing crises and thus avoid disastrous consequences. The notion of regime type, and in particular democracies, while being viewed as the ideal type of rule, has been faced with contradictions as Western democracies (the West versus the Rest) failed to effectively deal with the COVID-19 breakout.

Unlike democrats, autocrats conduct politics free from any public pressure or foreign intervention. Although not accountable to the citizenry, autocrats may nonetheless be accountable to a “selectorate” or “winning coalition” of elites.<sup>7</sup> When looking at how authoritarian regimes have handled the COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucial to account for the fact that leaders are speaking to two audiences. In an echo of Putnam’s two-level game, autocrats are concerned with both their domestic audience and their international one. Admitting that they lack the capacity to deal with the virus or breaking long-standing bans on access to free information endangers autocrats to their domestic audiences. Mass frustration is a commonly cited cause of insurrection, making autocratic underperformance potentially damaging to the regime.<sup>8</sup> Regime change can also come from those within the leaders “winning coalition” when these leaders see an opportunity for internal upheaval - like that in the aftermath of COVID-19.<sup>9</sup> As with Putnam’s “general equilibrium” theory, domestic politics influences international politics and vice-versa<sup>10</sup>. Here, Putnam speaks to international negotiations, conceptualizing them as two-level games, with negotiators first reaching an agreement with other international actors then taking that agreement back to their domestic audience for approval.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003). for a discussion of Selectorate Theory and how regime type impacts the provision of public vs. private goods.

<sup>7</sup> Bradford et al. (2020). Geddes (1999).

<sup>8</sup> Haggard and Kaufman (2017). Skocpol (1979).

<sup>9</sup> Svobik (2012).

<sup>10</sup> Putnam (1988).

<sup>11</sup> Putnam (1988).

At the domestic or national level, political groups pressure governments into adopting promising policies. While at the international level, the domestic governments themselves aim to maximize their national interests while avoiding any conflict on the international sphere. Putnam argues that the size of the win set is affected by three main factors, including the distribution of power, preferences and possible coalitions among domestic constituents, domestic political institutions, and the international-level negotiator's strategies.<sup>12</sup> When looking at issues like the COVID-19 virus and other potential global pandemics, there is a similar dynamic. Many countries desire international aid - meaning that they have to be open about their case numbers and the details of their situation. However, this can make a country's leaders seem weak to domestic opposition. Moreover, for countries like North Korea, who have numerous international foes, this perceived weakness can invite attack from outsiders. While Putnam's two-level game is unique in its ability to decipher the joint relation between domestic and international politics, several scholars before him had also attempted to highlight this debate. James Rosenau introduced the concept of linkage politics which insists on joining domestic and international concerns when in understanding the "conflicting behavior" between the domestic-international realm.<sup>13</sup> In the past, leaders and state constituents were not taken into consideration when analyzing domestic concerns, and the state was mainly considered as a unitary actor. In contrast, linkage research utilizes theories related to moral hazards, and problems of signaling intentions between both, domestic and foreign actors.

On a similar note, Russel and Wright (1993) stated that "... the mere description of an [...] event has little meaning by itself and that such an event can neither be predicted nor controlled unless account is taken of the circumstances which preceded it within each of the states

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<sup>12</sup> Putnam (1988).

<sup>13</sup> Rosenau (1969).

involved”.<sup>14</sup> A few decades later, Robert Powell (1993) further underscored the vital relationship between unitary actors and domestic concerns. Powel argued that national spending [on arms], while reflexive of international concerns, must nonetheless be balanced against demand for domestic consumption. When examining state responses to COVID-19, a similar dynamic can be seen: there are expectations imposed by the international community on states for how they should handle the pandemic and the pressures of their domestic audiences. Ostensibly, these two should align: accurate information and reporting, supplying Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to necessarily personnel, and coordinating with international actors to contain the spread.

While many scholars, like Putnam, focus on capabilities and negotiation, others argue that authoritarian leaders are weaker than democracies in their ability to use domestic politics to signal their intentions internationally.<sup>15</sup> Sending credible signals is a challenge for both democracies and authoritarian regimes, as it involves decisions that are inherently costly.<sup>16</sup> Yet, according to constructivist scholars, how leaders signal is dependent on their interpretation of others rather than their actual capabilities. When looking at Yarhi-Milo’s work, “In the Eye of the Beholder,” she identifies three possible ways to interpret signals: capabilities, behavior, and selective attention. The latter aims to explain why leaders seem to misinterpret signals so often, arguing that leaders only selectively interpret costly signals based on their preexisting paradigms. Psychology and individual bias can play a large role in the interpretation of signals, impacting leaders’ perception of threats.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, according to Glenn Loury, politicians engage in signaling games that eventually forces them to act in ways contradictory to their initial private beliefs.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless,

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<sup>14</sup> Russel and Wright (1933).

<sup>15</sup> Weiss (2013)

<sup>16</sup> See Schelling (1966). For a discussion on deterrence and the generation of credible threats.

<sup>17</sup> Jervis (2017).

<sup>18</sup> Loury (1994).

discerning signaling motives is a difficult task, particularly in autocracies, where politicians fail to provide any sort of records or statements. In analyzing China's management of foreign protest, Jessica Chen Weiss argues that in order to understand motives, one must consider the effect of diplomatic costs on governments. The Chinese government wittingly managed nationalist protests as a means of signaling diplomatic intentions. Nationalist protests are costly and can often stir domestic and diplomatic instability. As a result, China allows certain protests over others in an attempt to signal and bargain with the international community.

### **Responses to COVID-19: A Story of Vulnerability**

Autocratic regimes have purposely curtailed health protections in order to suppress political competition and prevent human development.<sup>19</sup> Autocrats fear that improved health, education, and economic security citizens would incentivize citizens to demand greater participation and an increase of resources,<sup>20</sup> and have thus confronted the ensuing pandemic with suspicion, denial and hostility towards activists, whistleblowers and civil society writ large. In times of crisis, access to information becomes a primary tool of public health protection. As COVID-19 spread across the world in late 2019, autocratic governments' silencing of critics and whistleblowers exacerbated what could have been a potentially containable threat into a global pandemic.<sup>21</sup> In early December of 2019, the Chinese authorities detained Dr. Li Wenlian who had warned of the initial outbreak of the virus. Even today, the Chinese government remains hesitant in providing access to data from the early stages of the outbreak.<sup>22</sup> Governments in Egypt,

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<sup>19</sup> Burkle (2020).

<sup>20</sup> Ruger (2005).

<sup>21</sup> Roth (2020).

<sup>22</sup> "Covid-19 pandemic" (2020).

Thailand, Cambodia, Venezuela, Bangladesh, and Turkey have followed suite, detaining governmental critics, healthcare workers and journalists.<sup>23</sup>

For authoritarian leaders, the COVID-19 pandemic was a fruitful opportunity to consolidate power and advance their political agendas. For example, in March 2020, Hungary passed a new law that would allow Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to rule by decree under a state of emergency without a set time limit.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Philippine’s President Rodrigo Duterte passed an antiterrorism bill to fight Islamic militancy South of the country. The bill entails detaining alleged terrorists without a warrant or a time limit to their detention.<sup>25</sup> Several other countries have also used COVID19 as a ruse to further their hold on personal privacies. Governments in China, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have created mobile tracing apps that track the spread of COVID19 through the population’s movement. As innovative as tracing apps might seem, as long as these technologies are being used in the absence of consent, they remain deterrents to fundamental civil rights, including the right to privacy, personal data and the right of information to whom the data is being shared.<sup>26</sup> On a similar note, Russia and Uzbekistan have also utilized street cameras and facial-recognition technologies to track quarantine violators and to trace the spread of the virus by monitoring human movement.<sup>27</sup>

### ***A Cost-Benefit Analysis of Authoritarian Decision Making***

Authoritarian regimes have a couple options when it comes to reporting their COVID-19 cases: 1) report accurate case numbers 2) purposefully misreport COVID-19 case numbers,<sup>28</sup> 3) attempts to deny the existence of COVID-19 by leaders, or 4) state denial of the existence of the

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<sup>23</sup> Roth (2020).

<sup>24</sup> Bayer (2020).

<sup>25</sup> Gutierrez (2020).

<sup>26</sup> Soltani (2020).

<sup>27</sup> “Moscow Deploys Facial Recognition” (2020).

<sup>28</sup> Presently, this is the hardest to identify, as it is likely to be some time before we know what countries’ true COVID-19 numbers were.



virus within their borders. In response to the state's actions, the public can protest, like in Belarus, where the general public protested against the president's denial of the virus and crowdfunded to support its healthcare system.<sup>29</sup> Belarus demonstrates that authoritarian leaders are not necessarily monoliths: the president denied the existence and severity of the virus, but did not move to utilize the whole of the state's apparatus to suppress reporting from the press or healthcare workers in the same way other autocrats have.

Authoritarian leaders have not universally denied the existence of COVID-19. In fact, some authoritarian regimes have reported accurate numbers, allowed in WHO teams, and have both received international aid and given aid to other countries if capable. In fact, some in democracies have lauded autocrats handling of the virus: arguing that being able to dictate policy to their citizenry and enforce lockdowns, curfews, and business closures better than their democratic counterparts. Yet, autocracies have behaved very differently in response to the virus, and the very things that make them potentially better at managing the virus – control of information, means of monitoring their populations, lack of public protests and civil liberties, their ability to operate independent of the public's will, etc. – also make it much easier for the regime to obfuscate their COVID-19 case numbers. How do we explain this variation in authoritarian responses?

We propose that authoritarian responses to COVID-19 are driven by two factors: 1) the relative strength of civil society and 2) the population's susceptibility to COVID-19 outbreaks. The relationship between the state and civil society is one well explored by the literature, particularly scholarship on authoritarian democratization.<sup>30</sup> A strong civil society can exist within

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<sup>29</sup> Roth (2020).

<sup>30</sup> Add in civil society in relation to democratization here

an autocracy, and this can act as a check on the autocrat's ability to dictate policy.<sup>31</sup> This results in our first hypothesis:

*H1: A strong civil society renders successful denial of the COVID-19 virus unlikely.*

A strong civil society is characterized by constituent engagement in and commentary on politics, allowances for free speech, assembly, and the like. Freedom House and V-Dem both provide measures for capturing civic engagement and the strength of civil society vis-à-vis regimes. It is crucial to note that the degree of freedom and engagement is necessarily lesser in autocracies than democracies, but there are variations within authoritarian regimes. Large numbers of COVID-19 numbers have been difficult for even large and influential states to handle, and handling of the virus has resulted in protests and rioting in both authoritarian and democratic states. When the state was already vulnerable to internal unrest, opening up information to the public, reporting to international audiences, or admitting weakness can prove fatal for a regime. Some regimes may even benefit from lying to their constituents and the international community, as this can be twisted to portray the authoritarian regime as more legitimate and more powerful than other states that are succumbing to the virus.

Responses to pandemics are not, however, solely driven by the strength of civil society. Unlike protesters, diseases cannot be imprisoned or silenced: if the population is vulnerable, the government is unlikely to be able to hide the impact of the disease, particularly a global pandemic. Despite the capacity of the Chinese government, for instance, it could not hide the existence of COVID-19. They may be publishing inaccurate numbers, as they have been accused of doing, but they could not obfuscate or deny the virus' existence within their borders. Other states may require

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<sup>31</sup> See Migdal (2001). *Security is a Bazaar too* for more on how civil society and regional actors act around state structures and how this influences state capacity and power projection capabilities within borders.

aid in resolving the health crisis, and for many, aid packages come with stipulations to report and allow in outside observers. This leads to our paper’s second and third hypotheses:

*H2: States that are more vulnerable to pandemics are less likely to deny the virus’s existence*

*H3: States that are in need of international aid are less likely to deny the existence of the virus.*

“Vulnerable,” in this case, is operationalized as states that have 1) a large population, 2) a high population density or large urban centers, or 3) an aging population or high median population age. These three factors make a population more susceptible to the virus and aid in a faster and more expansive spread of the virus. Hotspots for the virus initially tended to concentrate around urban centers, like Rome, Seattle, New York City, and London, among others. Factors that make the spread more dangerous and more rapid make hiding COVID-19 numbers from the population more difficult; reliance on international aid has been made partly contingent on joining international efforts to stem the spread of the disease - which necessitates accurate reporting.

Figure 1: When Do Authoritarian States Lie

	<b>Strong Civil Society</b>	<b>Weak Civil Society</b>
<b>High susceptibility to COVID-19</b>	Accurate reporting of COVID-19 case numbers	Inaccurate reporting of COVID-19 case numbers
<b>Low susceptibility to COVID-19</b>	Attempts to deny COVID-19 numbers	Denial of COVID-19 cases

In order to explore how civil society interacts with vulnerability to COVID-19, we will compare the responses of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Syria to the outbreak of the disease. All three cases are authoritarian regimes, of which Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are located in the same region that have, historically speaking, isolated themselves from the international community. Nonetheless, the two have pursued diametrically opposing policies in regards to COVID-19 reporting. Syria represents a break from the most-similar case design utilized when

examining Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, examining the veracity of the theory on a third country that shares fewer characteristics with the other two.

### **Comparing COVID-19 Responses: Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Syria**

Turkmenistan has taken perhaps one of the most extreme stances one can on the COVID-19 virus short of denying its existence altogether. The Syrian government took a less extreme approach, but was unable to or refused to provide accurate case numbers. Uzbekistan, conversely, has operated rather closely with the international community and has, at least as far as reports go, accurately reported case numbers. All three have been recalcitrant in the past to integrate with the international community. Polity IV ranks all as authoritarian; Freedom House ranks them as “Not Free,” with exceptionally low scores in political rights (-3 for Syria, 0 for Turkmenistan and 2 for Uzbekistan out of a possible 40). In Central Asia, all five republics are classified as “Not Free,” though Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are closer to being partly free than Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Syria has been a critical power in the Middle East, holding one of the Russian Federation’s only warm water port. Central Asian states, conversely, have been a largely isolated region even during the days of the Russian Empire. Kazakhstan is a notable exception, being the largest state in the region and critical to the Soviet military apparatus. Since the collapse of the USSR, it has been the site of a good deal of international investment – but it is largely an outlier in this. There have been efforts to connect the region with the larger international community, both through American investment in the aftermath of 9/11 and China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Neither have made substantial inroads for regime change in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, nor have they been central to either project, with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan being the primary beneficiaries.

Unlike Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, neither Turkmenistan nor Uzbekistan have experienced widespread internal conflict since the fall of the Soviet Union, and both carried over their Soviet elite leadership into independence. Syria on the other hand has been in a civil war for over a decade. What began as protests against the President soon turned into a complex conflict killing over 500,000 and displacing 13 million.<sup>32</sup> Both have experienced one transition of power since gaining independence: Turkmenistan in 2006 from Sapamurat Niyazov to Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov to and Uzbekistan in 2016 from Islam Karimov to Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Going based solely on the amount of time in power, this would indicate that Turkmenistan's Berdimuhamedov was in a better position at the start of the COVID crisis, having been in power for 14 years instead of four.

### ***Turkmenistan***

Turkmenistan has reported zero cases of COVID-19<sup>33</sup> – despite international observers believing that the virus has spread to the country. The states bordering Turkmenistan, including Turkmenistan's neighbor, Uzbekistan, have all reported cases, and they have instituted numerous measures to curtail the spread – from quarantines to border shutdowns.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, Iran is bordered to the Southwest by Iraq, which was one of the earliest epicenters for COVID-19 outside of China. In fact, besides small island nations, Turkmenistan is one of only two states in Eurasia to report zero cases of COVID-19.<sup>35</sup> Turkmenistan joins a rather illustrious company – the only other state to report zero cases is North Korea. Denial extended to the point of refusing to allow the Turkish government from evacuating a Turkish diplomat believed to have been infected with COVID-19.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> United States Institute of Peace (2020)

<sup>33</sup> McCarthy (2020).

<sup>34</sup> Pannier (2020b).

<sup>35</sup> Putz (2020).

<sup>36</sup> Pannier (2021c).

In addition to not reporting any cases of the virus, the government also prevented the World Health Organization (WHO) from sending outside observers until July 2020. The WHO's team reported that the Turkmen government "fully recognizes the risk currently posed by the virus," and commended the measures but in place to prevent the spread of respiratory infections.<sup>37</sup> However, the president's initial messages about the pandemic did little to spur action, and there were reports of individuals being fined for wearing masks earlier in 2020, since masked individuals were spreading disease.<sup>38</sup> Then, in August, the WHO raised concerns over the uptick in atypical pneumonia cases, urging for independent COVID-19 testing in Turkmenistan.<sup>39</sup> The WHO has, however, received criticism for not contesting the government's reports that likely COVID-19 cases are pneumonia or other respiratory infections.<sup>40</sup>

The Turkmen government used its intelligence apparatus and police force to enforce the denial of the virus and silence those who could report data contrary to the regime's rhetoric domesti. Government censorship continued into the new year, with police reportedly searching to phones of healthcare workers to ensure that they are not international news outlets.<sup>41</sup> While reporting no cases of the novel coronavirus, the government censorship has further stifled information coming from the country. Doctors and healthcare workers have not had access to testing kits and have been not been allowed to register COVID-19 cases or characteristic symptoms.<sup>42</sup> The government has also increasingly applied pressure to Turkmen expats abroad to stop their reporting on case numbers. There are some sources for finding data, such as COVID-19 Hasabat, a crowdsourced volunteer project to record COVID-19 related deaths inside

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<sup>37</sup> Smallwood (2020).

<sup>38</sup> "Полиция оштрафовала" (2020).

<sup>39</sup> RFE/RL's Turkmen Service (2021).

<sup>40</sup> Yaylymova (2020).

<sup>41</sup> RFE/RL's Turkmen Service (2021).

<sup>42</sup> IPHR and ITHR (2020).

Turkmenistan.<sup>43</sup> They currently report 202 deaths related to COVID-19.<sup>44</sup> Considering the costs associated with reporting numbers, it is highly likely that the number of coronavirus-associated deaths is much higher than reports indicate.

The question remains: why refuse to report accurate numbers? Government action in Turkmenistan goes beyond denial and into the realm of harming citizens, relief efforts, and their access to basic necessities. There have been reported food shortages in the country alongside mounting protests and grievances.<sup>45</sup>

However, with a small population, low population density, and low level of urbanization, the demographics of Turkmenistan did not lend themselves to the quick spread of the virus. Turkmenistan did not have a New York, a Miami, a Rome to be hotspots for the disease. While the virus has most likely spread to Turkmenistan, it has not done so to such a degree that it cannot be played off to the general population as a “pneumonia outbreak.”

Beyond this, though, prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, the Turkmen government was facing a series of issues. Its economy has been largely stagnant for several years, and the government has been unable to fund key government sectors since 2018.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, low oil and gas prices have damaged government revenues for years, particularly since the Turkmen economy relies predominantly upon oil and gas sales. A long standing shortage of currency forced a reliance on migrant labor and movement of the population to-and-from Uzbekistan.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, Berdymukhamedov was reportedly in bad health as of February 2020, making key constitutional amendments, restructuring the government, and potentially preparing his son to be

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<sup>43</sup> COVID19 Hasabat

<sup>44</sup> COVID19TM

<sup>45</sup> IPHR and IT (2020).

<sup>46</sup> Pannier (2020a).

<sup>47</sup> RFE/RL’s Turkmen Service and Najbullah (2019).

his successor.<sup>48</sup> Many of these issues have been long-standing, but there has been little done by the population to protest the regime.

These elements introduced government vulnerability prior to the declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic - a threat that would both exacerbate rumors of Berdymukhamedov's ailing health and the country's poor economic performance. Taken together, the vulnerability of acknowledging a potential COVID-19 outbreak combined with the lack of major urban or population centers to exacerbate the spread of the virus, the Turkmen government had the capability vis-à-vis civil society and desire to deny the existence of COVID-19 within its borders.

### ***Uzbekistan***

The Uzbek government took a different path to tackle the COVID-19 crisis. According to WHO, as of April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2021, there have been 83,802 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 631 deaths.<sup>49</sup> USAID reports that as of November 2020, the US government had provided over \$9.1 million in assistance, including masks, gloves, other PPE equipment, and funding for large-scale testing.<sup>50</sup> The Uzbek government received additional aid from the World Bank to the tune of 200 million.<sup>51</sup> For comparison, USAID provided \$1.42 million to Turkmenistan, and reports note the lack of confirmed cases in Turkmenistan.<sup>52</sup> This aid was put to use in Uzbekistan, expanding the number of COVID-19 laboratories from 3 to 111, instituting several lockdowns, and expanding hospital capacity.<sup>53</sup> Unlike Turkmenistan, the Uzbek government has cooperated with the international community, hosting missions from several other countries and joining studies to ascertain the effect of COVID-19 on healthcare workers. This openness to the international

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<sup>48</sup> RFE/RL (2020).

<sup>49</sup> WHO (2021).

<sup>50</sup> USAID (2021b).

<sup>51</sup> The World Bank (2020).

<sup>52</sup> USAID (2020a).

<sup>53</sup> Shadmanov et al. (2020).



community was somewhat unexpected, considering the Uzbek government's past behavior. Like most authoritarian regimes, there are concerns for human rights, the targeting of journalists, and the accurate dissemination of information to the citizenry. However, unlike Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan has been transparent about its cases and has been accepting international aid.

Unlike either Kazakhstan or Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan cannot rely on natural resources for economic growth. The key drivers of economic growth in Uzbekistan, instead, are agriculture, industry, and the service sector.<sup>54</sup> It has been noted, though, that compared to other countries in the region, Uzbekistan only attracts a limited amount of FDI compared to other countries in the region, ranking last in FDI stock and estimated FDI inflows.<sup>55</sup>

Like many autocratic regimes, Mirziyoyev can face threats to his continued power from the general population and his inner circle. However, despite being in power for less time than his Turkmen counterpart, Mirziyoyev has instituted numerous reforms that have increased his general popularity, including opening up travel and economic ties with the other states in Central Asia.<sup>56</sup> This has been alternatively described as an "Uzbek Spring," and it is both an opportunity for Mirziyoyev to solidify his power separate from Karimov's legacy and for potential detractors to make their displeasure known.

When considering the state's response to COVID-19, though, it is crucial to note that Uzbekistan was more at risk than Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan's population is far less than that of Uzbekistan: 5.9 million to 33.6 million in 2019. This difference between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan may have placed more pressure on the Uzbek government to rely on aid from the international community while Turkmenistan did not face similar constraints. While the regime

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<sup>54</sup> Samruk Kazyna (2018).

<sup>55</sup> Kenisarin and Andrews (2008). Metazas and Kechagia (2016).

<sup>56</sup> Korybko (2017).

may have been at less of a risk compared to Turkmenistan's, Uzbekistan is more pressed by its domestic environment to report accurate numbers for the purpose of receiving international aid than its counterpart.

## **Syria**

Polity IV considers the Syrian Arab Republic as an autocracy while Freedom House regards the country as not free, scoring lower on political rights and civil liberties than Uzbekistan. Notably, its civil liberty score is higher than Turkmenistan's. As the pandemic hit the world, COVID-19 remained shrouded in secrecy within Syria. With an ongoing civil war, official COVID-19 case numbers within the country remain at a consistent low, lockdown measures have been lifted, and health equipment remains inaccessible. It takes a middle position between Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan: case numbers are not accurate, but the government is not wholesale denying the existence of the virus.

On March 30, 2020, the first coronavirus related death was reported in the Syrian Arab Republic's (SAR).<sup>57</sup> From 3 January 2020 until 19 April 2021, out of a population of 17 million, 21,142 confirmed cases with 1,446 deaths have been reported to the WHO.<sup>58</sup> However, as with many authoritarian regimes, these numbers seem too low compared to states with more transparent reporting. The deputy director for health in Damascus estimates the real number of case in Damascus alone to be 12,500.<sup>59</sup> In April 2020, Syria tested as low as 100 a day, half of which were in the capital, Damascus.<sup>60</sup> By August, testing increased to approximately 300 a day but only in five testing centers for all areas under the government's control. In Northern Syria and in Daraa, testing has been unavailable since June of 2020. The few cases in which testing did occur took

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<sup>57</sup> Amnesty International (2020)

<sup>58</sup> WHO (2020)

<sup>59</sup> The Guardian (2020)

<sup>60</sup> Ozalp (2020)

weeks to be processed because the tests had to be sent to the Central Public Health Laboratory in Damascus. In August, the Ministry of Health (MoH) declared that the government was unable to conduct testing for the general public because of “an unjust economic blockade imposed on the country, which affected the health sector.”<sup>61</sup> Syria’s already declining health sector has been severely affected by the pandemic. According to the WHO, only 50% of hospitals across Syria are fully functioning, 25% are partially functioning due to a shortage of staff, equipment, medicines or damage to hospital buildings, while the remaining 25% are not functioning at all.<sup>62</sup> Relatives of infected people in Damascus have states that authorities are only allowing public hospitals in Damascus to treat COVID-19 patients, while private facilities are forced to turn patients away.

Low testing rates, while attributed to the government’s lack of coherent policy<sup>63</sup>, are also due to the detrimental economic crisis within the country. The Syrian pound has increased 30 folds from the 2011 pre-war exchange rate of 50 to the US dollar.<sup>64</sup> The economic crisis has further deepened with the US sanctions that targeted any foreign powers that provide the government of Syria (GoS) with significant financial, material or technological support.<sup>65</sup> Lebanon, Syria’s neighboring country, is also facing its worst economic meltdown since the 1975 civil war. This in turn has affected trade with Syria and further slumped the country’s economy.

More than 80% of Syrians live below the poverty line, and the cost of living increases more than 100% each year.<sup>66</sup> However, as citizens struggle to maintain their daily living, food and shelter are prioritized over health. In addition, there are also six million internally displaced people in the

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<sup>61</sup> Amnesty International (2020)

<sup>62</sup> McGowan (2020)

<sup>63</sup> Amnesty International (2020)

<sup>64</sup> Makki (2020)

<sup>65</sup> Ozalp (2020)

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

country, many of whom are living in overcrowded conditions in camps with insufficient water and sanitation infrastructure.<sup>67</sup> Thus maintaining social distancing seems highly impossible.

The lack of a proper COVID19 response policy is not a mere result of lack of medical aid. In fact, since the beginning of the civil war in 2011, Syria has received aid donations from multiple organizations and state governments worldwide. The United Nation Security Council resolution 2533 that allows the delivery of food, medicine and other lifesaving assistance through the Bab al-Hawa Border Crossing has been extended until July 2021 in order to accommodate for the 2.8 million displaced Syrians at the country's North West border with Turkey. Moreover, the WHO and Damascus-based international organization have claimed that they have provided the government with personal protective equipment (PPE). However, humanitarian workers have nonetheless reported that the distribution of the PPE has been extremely slow.<sup>68</sup> The lack of resources and testing have further forced some Syrian hospitals to list causes of death as "suspected COVID-19".<sup>69</sup> Due to the deadly effects of the war, 70 percent of health workers have fled the country and over 50 percent of the health infrastructure has been damaged or destroyed, as a result of almost 600 attacks on medical facilities.<sup>70</sup>

It is important to note that the GoS has taken certain, albeit controversial, preventive measures against COVID-19. On 13 July 2020, a reduction in daily court sessions in the Justice Palace was enforced. Employment for females with children in the Ministry and directorates within the Ministry of Finance was suspended. Halls utilized for weddings and condolence gatherings would be closed, unless open-air, in which case a 40 per cent capacity must be

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<sup>67</sup> BBC (2020)

<sup>68</sup> Amnesty International (2020)

<sup>69</sup> Makki (2020)

<sup>70</sup> Human Rights Watch (2021)

adhered to. Prayers for Eid Al-Adha and religious teaching seminars in Damascus and Rural Damascus have been suspended. However, Friday prayers and mass prayers are allowed to continue with adherence to preventive measures. Otherwise, the daily curfew and the travel ban between and within governorates remains lifted. As long as precautionary measures are taken, markets, restaurants, cafes, gyms, parks, theaters, cinemas, public and private transportation, and most leisure facilities remain open and available to the public. According to the MoH, due to the economic situation, no broad-based restrictions would be restated.<sup>71</sup>

Simply put, Syria cannot afford to shut down. The GoS's debilitated health infrastructure has exacerbated the effects of COVID-19 within the country. Moreover, the government's lack of information sharing has precluded citizens from properly understanding the gravity of the situation. Nonetheless, due to the worsening of the economy, Syrian citizens are forced to go out on a daily basis to secure food and money. In addition to the worsening economic situation and the lack of proper testing, the MoH in Syria remains silent on COVID-19 updates and only reports information to the UN.<sup>72</sup>

Since January 2020, the GoS has only reported 21,142 confirmed cases of COVID19 within the country. However, similar to other authoritarian regimes, underreporting is suspected, and civil society organizations have argued that the real number of confirmed cases is much higher. As COVID19 struck the Syrian republic, civil society was at the helm of the emergency response system against the pandemic and played a critical role in mitigating crisis and building communication between government actors and the local communication. In response to the almost negligible assistance from government, civil society organizations have taken it upon

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<sup>71</sup> UNOCHA (2020)

<sup>72</sup> Amnesty International (2020)

themselves to offer assistance and medical aid to the people. Organizations have established centers to quarantine coronavirus patients and have disinfected public areas as well as preparing medical facilities with response mechanisms.<sup>73</sup> However, the power attributed to civil society organizations remains under the governance of the Syrian republic. In Northwestern Syria, in cities under rebel rule in particular, funding to these areas was relocated to COVID19 emergency preparations. As such, civil society had lost its autonomy over the area and was simply regarded as an implementer of the priorities of international organizations.<sup>74</sup> While several Syrian civil society organizations have fused their skills and capabilities together in order to manage the pandemic together, their powers remain restricted by the GoS's weak health infrastructure, lack of testing, a broken economy, lack of awareness among the communities, as well as a lack of coordination and transparency between international organizations, the government and civil society.<sup>75</sup>

In March 2020, the WHO classified Syria as a “very high risk” country”. Compared to Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, Syria has the largest population of 17 million, making it highly susceptible to COVID-19. Yet unlike Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, Syria has been in and ongoing civil war for over ten years, resulting in the total displacement of 13 million people around the world, and 6 million within the country itself. From the 6 million, many are living in overcrowded conditions in camps with insufficient water and sanitation infrastructure, making the possibility of social distancing impossible.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Half of Syria, The impact of the covid-19 pandemic on Syrians: an analysis by Syrian civil society a comprehensive briefing by half of Syria, April 2020

<sup>74</sup> Beaujouan and Ghreiz (2020)

<sup>75</sup> See Half of Syria, The impact of the covid-19 pandemic on Syrians, April 2020, for case by case details on the challenges and opportunities of civil society within Syria

<sup>76</sup> BBC (2020)

## **Conclusion**

COVID-19 has been an unprecedented global pandemic in the modern age, and governments across the world are dealing with expectations regarding information available to their constituents, treatment and prevention efforts, and coordination with the international community. When looking at authoritarian regimes, though, we have seen a range of responses. Some states have accurately reported COVID-19 numbers, others have provided mixed reports or underreported numbers, and still others have denied the existence of the virus in the first place. We assert that a combination of state vulnerability to domestic unrest and susceptibility to the COVID-19 virus - or any other pandemic for that matter - determines the path authoritarian leaders take in response to the virus. Autocrats care first and foremost about remaining in power; if admitting to the virus or accurate numbers encourages domestic unrest, authoritarian leaders are unlikely to report accurate COVID numbers to their constituents or the international community. However, their ability to obfuscate data is impacted by factors that the regime cannot control, like population size and density, the size of urban centers, links for international travel, etc. Those states that are likely to see the quick spread of a virus are less likely to lie due to lying being more difficult. The difference in approaches can be seen when comparing Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Syria, but these differences are seen in other authoritarian states, such as North Korea and Belarus. Belarus, for instance, was more susceptible to the virus than North Korea and provided mixed reports. North Korea is vulnerable to domestic upsets, or at the very least highly concerned about them, and the country has few links with the international community and a small population. These facts made it much easier for the state to deny the existence of COVID-19 wholesale, something countries who experienced an early disease hotspot would have been pressed to replicate.

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