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Rising Authoritarianism: The Crippling Effects of Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic provides unprecedented situations and challenges for the world on multiple levels. The structures and functioning of various institutions in society are questioned as the world looks to them for assistance and support. Governments under such situations are given new and increased powers to efficiently combat the myriad of problems faced by them. The problem, however, lies in the fact that large amounts of power, uncertain situations and unrest among the world population in the past have given way to autocratic leaders manipulating and consolidating their powers. The establishment of various autocratic states is owed to situations of widespread social and political unrest. In the modern world, under the situations of the pandemic, various states are showing similar authoritarian traits. Powers secured under the pandemic are being misused by leaders and governments to establish conditions favourable to them, often damaging the institution of democracy in their nation. Hungary appears to be one such nation where the government has taken a large number of decisions in the pandemic, in an arguably non-democratic manner. This paper aims to analyse the rise of authoritarianism in the world today and the role played by the pandemic in the same.

"Major crises have major consequences, usually unforeseen. The Great Depression spurred isolationism, nationalism, fascism, and World War II. The 2008 financial crisis generated a surge in antiestablishment populism that replaced leaders across the globe. Future historians will trace comparably large effects to the current coronavirus pandemic; the challenge is figuring them out ahead of time" (Fukuyama 2020).

- **Francis Fukuyama**

In December 2019, the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 commonly known as coronavirus 2, in Wuhan, China led to widespread disease and death in the nation. In March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared the outbreak of the disease, a global pandemic, advising nations and individuals to take necessary actions and precautions to contain the spread of the virus. The Covid-19 pandemic has now affected all continents of the world except Antarctica and has

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caused social, political, economic, and psychological unrest. The contagious and fatal nature of the disease has led to the imposition of lockdowns, travel restrictions, closure of universities and workplaces and more. It is needless to say, these are unprecedented times, with governments facing situations like never before. Governments all around the world have received an increased amount of power at their disposal to contain the virus in their countries and maintain peace and stability. However, various countries have now witnessed displays of authoritarian tendencies and a disregard of democratic ideals in formally democratic countries, as a result of the increased powers received by the government to tackle the situation. The pandemic has thus exposed the possibility of a changed world order, ushering it into a political age where soft authoritarians receive opportunities to tighten their grip and move further from democratic set ups. In light of the pandemic, with the justification of protecting the population, leaders in Brazil, Serbia, India Israel and many such countries have taken questionable actions, indicating a departure from the common norm with attempts to consolidate individual or party power. Strong central governance is favourable in responding to situations such as this pandemic as it allows prompt action and better management. However, it is also a threat due to historical evidence of increased power in the hands of leadership leading to forms of authoritarianism emerging in the world. The situations prevalent in Hungary are an example of national leaders using the pandemic as an excuse to increase their stronghold over the nation, further imposing their ideas and suspending democratic functioning. Over the years, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has used multiple crises to systematically dismantle democratic functioning in the nation and establish a form of governance that cannot be classified as democratic. Actions taken by him and the Hungarian government during the pandemic have raised questions about the state of democracy in the nation and its undeniable tilt towards authoritarianism. Authoritarianism as a regime takes various forms, evolving with time and the nature of leadership, usually stemming from situations of unrest. This paper aims to analyse whether the Covid-19 pandemic is a situation of political and social unrest that gives rise to authoritarian tendencies and whether Hungary as a nation tilted towards authoritarianism using powers provided by the pandemic.

Recent developments in Hungary point towards the regime moving from a democracy to a form of authoritarianism in an electoral set up. The recent Freedom House reports officially classify Hungary as a hybrid regime, meaning it can no longer fall within the category of democracies. It falls between a democracy and an autocracy, indicating the increasing influence of authoritarianism in the regime. Authoritarian regimes are ideally regimes that aim to take complete control of the state and its institutions to promote the ideology of one leader or

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political group. They can take various forms, and like any other political concept, evolve with time but have a few core characteristics at heart. Core characteristics of authoritarian regimes first and foremost include the limitation or denial of political freedom to individuals of the country. This, in the modern world can happen through suspension of elections, banning opposition parties, using state resources to influence the political image of opposition and more. In these regimes the rulers determine decisions taken by the state and usually take them based upon a certain ideology. There is a high dependence on the usage of force and coercion to impose the will of the leader. Such regimes usually use the bureaucracy and governmental organisations as a tool, strengthening control with the use of manipulation and power. There is mass propaganda, and the ruler is usually in control of the opinion that the public possesses.

Hungary, since Prime Minister Orban came to power in 2010, has displayed increasing coherence with characteristics of authoritarianism. Orban has used crises along with power and manipulation to make strategic moves that strengthen the power he possesses. On an international scale, diplomats have noticed the Orban regime's attempts to dismantle the democracy in Hungary and establish his idea of "*illiberális demokrácia*" or illiberal democracy which he announced publicly at the Băile Tuşnad (Tusnádfürdő, summer university) in 2014. The refugee crisis of 2015 saw a state of emergency imposed by Orban that has still not ended, despite the fact that in the recent times Hungary has faced no particular issues related to immigrants. The Orban government also amended the Hungarian Constitution in 2013. The opportunist nature of the government and its history of using crises to capture democratic control indicated towards similar actions being taken in a global health crisis.

On March 30, 2020, the Hungarian Parliament passed an act, commonly referred to as the Coronavirus Act, that announced an indefinite state of emergency in the nation. As a part of this act, elections and referendums in the nation were postponed. Criticism of the government and distribution of information regarding the government's approach to the pandemic was made an offence punishable with up to five years in prison. Breaking quarantine was also punishable up to three years of imprisonment. The most alarming decision that was passed was to allow the Prime Minister to rule by decree, suspending parliamentary operation for the duration of the emergency. This Act was passed by the parliament with a majority since the majority constitutes of members of the Fidesz party, which is Orban's own party. The failure of the opposition to object to the act immediately after its implication brought them under the "no criticism" rule, making any opposing statements a punishable offence. This move made by Prime Minister Orban was against the principles of the European Union, which was focused on the preservation of liberal democracy and democratic rule. Further, concerns were that, like

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the 2015 refugee crisis emergency which is yet to be revoked, this too would give indefinite powers to the Prime Minister. Countries of the European Union have all accessed emergency powers however, no country has suspended the functioning of the parliament, giving the power to rule to an individual entity. The Corona Act of the Hungarian government is being called the "Enabling Act" by the opposition in Hungary due to its resemblance to the Enabling Act of 1933 passed by the Reichstag (Jacobsen 2020). It gave Hitler similar powers that enabled him to assume a dictatorial position. The situation prevalent in Hungary as a result of this act created a cause for international concern, raising questions on whether the covid-19 pandemic would lead to Hungary becoming the first authoritarian state of the European Union.

Putting the state of Hungary's government in context with the characteristics of authoritarian regimes reveals the situation it is facing under the current regime. The first and foremost characteristic of an authoritarian state is the limitation of political freedom and alteration of the political process. Hungary conducts free and fair elections at regular intervals which validate the rule of the Fidesz. However, the recent Coronavirus Act of the government saw a direct attack on the opposition. State-provided federal campaign funds were slashed down by fifty percent to allocate funds to areas that require support during the pandemic. This move particularly affects the opposition as the ruling party Fidesz has connections with various powerful individuals and multiple sources for funds. Apart from this, the political process stands altered as the opposition is constantly portrayed as a group that does not wish for the wellbeing of the nation and its citizens.

Further, authoritarian states witness the imposition of an ideology through power and manipulation by their leader. Reduced importance is given to rights and liberties of the people. Orban has used the past decade of his premiership to popularize and apply his ideology of illiberal democracy in every aspect possible. He altered the national constitution and made the anti-liberal nature of his rule extremely clear. The state of rights and liberties in the country is best represented through the recent move against rights of trans people in the country. Using the authoritative powers granted by the pandemic, Orban suspended the rights of transgender people to legally change their gender. This shows the right-wing, illiberal actions of the government in the clearest light. Rights of various groups and communities have been and will be constantly questioned and altered to promote the ideology of the prime minister. The voices of opposition also get quashed by that of the state.

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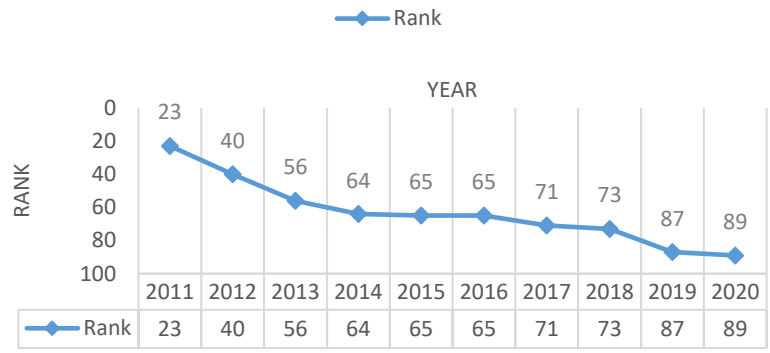
The aspect of voices being heard brings us to yet another important characteristic of authoritarianism – the control of public opinion and spread of propaganda. Public opinion in Hungary is highly influenced by the state. The formation of opinion is also highly dependent on the media which is tightly controlled by the Orban regime. Public media houses promote the government and its actions, while most private media houses are either owned by close friends or officials of the Prime Minister. The control of public opinion, represented by the press freedom index indicates a constant decline in freedom of the media in Hungary, with its rank reaching the lowest ever point in 2020. The Index (Refer Table 1) reveals a constant decline in the freedom of the press in the last ten years, which were under Prime Minister Orban's rule. In the pandemic, criticism of the government's approach and decisions to combat the virus, can lead to imprisonment. This measure calls for a form of self-censorship among the press due to the fear of prosecution by the state. Studies in the country have revealed that public opinion is highly influenced by the government which poses any views challenging the state and its beliefs as attempts to hamper state functioning. Criticisms of Hungary's approach to the pandemic were categorized as attempts to hinder the nation's progress. Conservative views prevail in the nation as a result of the ideas propagated by the government and the ruling party. In the covid-19 emergency, Orban denied asylum rights in border areas indirectly associating the spread of the virus with foreign individuals seeking asylum. Public opinion is also influenced by the opposition being portrayed as those who stand against the greater good of the Hungarian public.

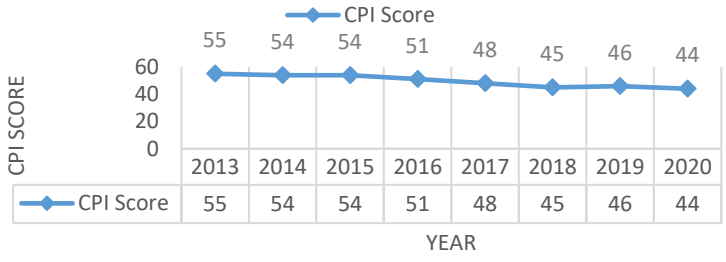
TABLE 1 : PRESS FREEDOM INDEX OF HUNGARY



Data Source: Reporters Without Borders (rsf.org)

Apart from this, favouritism and division of powerful positions among the leader's close friends is also witnessed in Hungary. High levels of corruption are observed, and transparency of processes is a myth. Corruption has creeped into almost every aspect of Hungarian bureaucracy. The country witnesses high levels of corruption in the judiciary, economy and the government. Deals of public infrastructure are given to officials and authorities who are close to Orban. The Corruption Perception Index (Refer Table 2) by Transparency International reveals a deteriorating score of corruption levels in the country. A score between 100-50 indicates lower levels of corruption while 49-0 indicates higher corruption. Under the Orban regime, Hungary has gone from relatively low levels of corruption to higher levels, witnessing the highest ever corruption score in 2020. In the past few years, funds have been diverted from important sectors towards Orban's personal projects. Using the powers in the pandemic, information regarding a Chinese investment in the country was made confidential for ten years. The opaque nature of processes and the evident corruption in the nation are a cause of concern. Transparency in processes is a key aspect of democratic functioning.

TABLE 2: CORRUPTION PERCEPTION INDEX OF HUNGARY



Data Source: Transparency International

Viktor Orban and the Fidesz party that campaigned with the famous slogan "Nekünk Magyarország az első" meaning "For us Hungary comes first", are constantly taking actions to hamper the democratic sentiments of the Hungarian nation. Democracy in Hungary is being destroyed with the passage of time. Each systematic blow to the system takes it a step away from its legacy of being one of the leading post-Soviet democracies, turning it into an electoral autocracy under the leader. The leader that campaigned saying Hungary comes first for him, uses the Hungarian state to fulfil his individual desire for power and impose his ideology of illiberal democracy. Orban had a previous term as Prime Minister of Hungary from 1998-2002. He is known to have made a statement saying if he was to come to power again, he would not be so easily removed. As events reveal, the Prime Minister uses the state and its institutions to establish his power, using the law as a weapon and tool. The situations in Hungary are such that it will indeed be difficult to remove the premier from power if not checked soon.

Authoritarianism rises out of terrifying situations where the threat could be anyone and anywhere (Walker 2020). In the past, such situations accompanied wars and revolutions. Today, our world faces a different form of war, one against a virus, a disease. Fear is the emotion that dominates most of the world population as uncertainty prevails. People all over the world, look to higher powers to receive help, guidance and hope in the situation. Governments face unique challenges and have the task of containing the unrest while maintaining sustainable conditions for the population. In the process, the surveillance state function, typical to authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, is witnessed in democracies. The virus and its nature make it important for governments to monitor their citizens and their actions. However, trust is established in the government and international organisations, hoping they would not misuse the extraordinary powers provided. Citizens are more tolerant with their governments providing them the benefit of the doubt. It is also harder for citizens to voice their opinions through protests and other forms due to the contagious virus and the government's increased powers. Leaders of nations thus have the freedom to exercise their own will and curb the power of systems of checks and balances. The misuse of the same threatens the rise of authoritarian tendencies in governments. In Hungary, the pandemic facilitated the passing of controversial bills, changes in fund allocations and power structures due to the emergency. The emergency though revoked, did massive harm to the democratic sentiment in the nation. The pandemic does provide unprecedented situations of unrest in the world but anti-democratic tendencies and actions which could cause a great amount of harm must be contained by international organisations and diplomats. The pandemic does possess the ability to influence the world order, but it must be moulded to produce a favourable effect.

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