

Lockdowns Wrecked Democracy Around the World

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While the number of fatalities attributed to Covid-19 is carefully tracked by governments, few people have recognized how pandemic-spurred crackdowns have devastated democracy around the world. Emergency proclamations have entitled presidents and other government officials to seize vast new powers previously forbidden to them. Government bureaucrats became a new priesthood that could sanctify unlimited sacrifices merely by invoking dubious statistical extrapolations of future perils.

In October, Freedom House issued a report, [Democracy under Lockdown - The Impact of COVID-19 on Global Freedom](#), which warned that since the pandemic started, “the condition of democracy and human rights has worsened in 80 countries.” Sarah Repucci, co-author of the report, warned that “governments’ responses to the pandemic are eroding the pillars of democracy around the world.” Abuses of power have been propelled by a presumption that government officials are entitled to all the power they claim to need to keep people safe.

When the pandemic arrived in America, governors in many states responded by dropping the equivalent of a Reverse [Neutron Bomb](#) - something which destroys the economy while supposedly leaving human beings unharmed. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo set the standard when he effectively declared that he was entitled to inflict any burden on his state’s residents to “[save just one life](#).” Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer [prohibited anyone from leaving their home](#) to visit family or friends. Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti banned people from [walking or bicycling](#) outside. More than ten million jobs were lost thanks to lockdowns, a major reason [why life expectancy](#) in the United States last year had its sharpest plunge since World War Two.

Australia imposed some of the most heavy-handed restrictions. In August, the state of Victoria dictated an 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew for the Melbourne area and prohibited people from venturing more than three miles from their residence. Victoria Premier Daniel Andrews decreed: “Where you [slept last night](#) is where you’ll need to stay for the next six weeks.” Melbourne has been hit [by repeated lockdowns](#) since then.

Britain unleashed some of the most absurd restrictions. In June, it prohibited couples who live in different homes [from having sex indoors](#). The *Independent* (U.K.) noted, “People who have sex outside can be punished under pre-existing laws on outraging public decency and indecent exposure.” Steve Watson reported in January for *Summit News* that British cabinet

ministers “have privately debated preventing people from [talking to each other](#) in the street and in supermarkets, and even preventing people from leaving home more than once per week, and introducing curfews.” British vaccines minister Nadhim Zahawi fretted, “I’m worried about some of the pictures I’ve seen of social interactions in parks, if you have to exercise you can go out for exercise only.” Apparently, a national vow of silence is necessary to fight Covid. *Summit News* noted, “Police are also demanding new powers to force entry into the homes of suspected lockdown violators.” Former British Supreme Court Justice Jonathan Sumption complained last month, “Foreign travel is being prohibited, turning us into [a hermit island](#) on the basis we cannot know what mutations may be lurking out there. The logic of these policies is that we must be locked down for ever simply because the world is a dangerous place.”

New Zealand has imposed four separate lockdowns in its pursuit to banish the virus from the island, repeatedly placing residents in the capital city under house arrest. In October, the government announced it was creating “quarantine centers” for anyone who tests positive and refuses to obey government orders. One Twitter wag scoffed, “New Zealand went [from gun bans to concentration camps](#) in less than a year.”

Covid horrors have been more dramatic in some developing nations. In Uganda, as the [Economist reported](#), Francis Zaake, a member of parliament, delivered food to his neediest constituents during a pandemic lockdown. But “Uganda’s President Yoweri Museveni has ordered that only the government may hand out food aid. Anyone else who does so can be charged with murder, Mr Museveni has threatened, since they might do it in a disorderly way, attract crowds and thereby spread the coronavirus.”

Police and soldiers forcibly entered Zaake’s house and “dragged him into a van and threw him in a cell. He says they beat, kicked and cut him, crushed his testicles, sprayed a blinding chemical into his eyes, called him a dog and told him to quit politics. He claims that one sneered: ‘We can do whatever we want to you or even kill you...No one will demonstrate for you because they are under lockdown.’”

In Kenya, police killed at least [15 people during](#) brutal crackdowns on alleged violators of lockdown decrees. Amnesty International declared that the Covid-19 pandemic provided “the perfect storm for indiscriminate mass violence” by the police, thanks to the “pervasive culture of impunity among [police] service members who rely on systemic corruption.”

Journalists in many nations risked their hides if they violated politicians’ monopoly on fear-mongering. Almost a hundred nations have imposed new restrictions on freedom of speech and freedom of the press since the pandemic began. [Freedom House](#) reported: “Governments enacted new legislation against spreading ‘fake news’ about the virus. They also limited independent questioning at press conferences, suspended the printing of newspapers, and blocked websites.” Reporters Without Borders, a nonprofit for press freedom, warned, “Most governments yielded to the temptation, using a [variety of repressive measures](#)..., of making official channels the only credible and authoritative sources of information.” Many regimes have expanded the definition of “fake news” to justify repression:

- “In Ethiopia, the definition of [misinformation is so](#) broad that it gives the authorities the discretionary power to declare any piece of information false.”
- “In India, Egypt, Botswana and Somalia, only government statements on the

subject may be published.”

- “In Cambodia, the government gave itself the legal power to ban the publication of “any information that could cause unrest, fear or disorder.”
- In Rwanda, the journalist who runs the YouTube news channel Ishema TV was imprisoned for violating Covid lockdown regulations. “At the time of his arrest he was reporting on the effects of the lockdown on the population and [investigating allegations](#) of rape committed by soldiers enforcing the lockdown,” Reporters without Borders notes.
- In Zimbabwe, anyone “who publishes or disseminates ‘false’ information about an official, or that impedes the response to the pandemic, faces up [to 20 years in prison](#),” the *Economist* reported.
- Tanzania suffered a wave of censorship after the nation’s president publicly denounced Covid-19 as a “Western plot.” “Several news outlets, including the country’s leading Swahili-language newspaper Mwananchi, were [closed down](#) after publishing stories about Covid-19. Others were forced to broadcast apologies after carrying reports on the subject which angered the authorities,” Reporters without Borders noted.
- In Thailand, Amnesty International reported, “authorities are prosecuting social media users who criticize the government and monarchy in a [systematic campaign to crush](#) dissent which is being exacerbated by new COVID-19 restrictions. Authorities have wasted no time using existing repressive laws in order to [censor ‘false’ communications](#) related to COVID-19.” The government decreed five-year prison sentences for any Thai journalists or media outlets that published information officials decree to be “[capable of causing fear](#) in the public.”

“Government knows best” is the subtext for arbitrary decrees issued around the world. An Associated Press article in January explained why Californians were denied access to the information that determined the fate of their freedom: “State health officials said they rely on a very complex set of measurements that [would confuse and potentially mislead](#) the public if they were made public.” But many data-driven dictatorial policies relied on data that was either fraudulent, politically contrived, or laughably inaccurate. On the day that Joe Biden was [inaugurated as president](#), the World Health Organization changed the test standard for defining Covid cases, guaranteeing that far fewer “cases” would be reported and thereby making a mockery of the previous 10 months data.

The pandemic’s precedents pose a long-term peril for liberty around the globe. Freedom House expects that “official responses to COVID-19 have laid the groundwork for [government excesses](#) that could affect democracy for years to come.” This was foreseeable from the start of the pandemic but the media in some Western nations were the [biggest cheerleaders](#) for obliterating limits on political power. The secrecy that proliferated during the pandemic will make it harder for citizens to recognize how badly they have been misgoverned.

Going forward, citizens in many nations might appreciate this old adage from American politics: “The Constitution isn’t perfect but it’s better than what we have now.” Federal judge William Stickman IV declared in September, “Broad population-wide lockdowns are such a [dramatic inversion of](#) the concept of liberty in a free society as to be nearly presumptively unconstitutional.” But unless there is a similar stark ruling from the Supreme Court, shutdowns could return whenever politicians can panic enough citizens with some

new threat.

Lockdown victims around the globe would be wise to heed Thomas Jefferson's 1798 warning that the doctrine "that the general government is the exclusive judge of the extent of the powers delegated to it [is] nothing [short of despotism](#); since the discretion of those who administer the government, and not the Constitution, would be the measure of their powers." The pandemic painfully illustrated how government officials can always concoct the data to justify whatever decree they itch to issue. And regardless of the needless deaths and disruptions caused by government policies, it will be the opponents of lockdowns who will [be labeled grandma-killers](#).

The Biden administration is reviving America's [proselytizing for democracy](#) around the globe. But Covid-19 crackdowns are a warning for people to be wary of oppressive governments regardless of their purported mandate. The world doesn't need any more Cage Keeper Democracies where citizens' ballots merely designate who will place them under house arrest.

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