

Profiteers of the pandemic?

COVID-19 has not killed global populism

by **Aline Burni**,

German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)



The Current Column

of 25 June 2020

d·i·e

Deutsches Institut für
Entwicklungspolitik



German Development
Institute



Many populist-led countries are among the most affected by the Corona virus outbreak, as the USA, Brazil, Russia, the UK, and India illustrate. Although these countries' governments do not have a unitary response to COVID-19, crisis management has been particularly challenging for them, due to varying combinations of denial and inconsistency, blame-shifting, lack of transparency and overall hostility to science. Such practices are not exclusive to populists, but they are more likely to face serious problems in dealing with the crisis because of their worldview.

The populist worldview separates society between "the people" and "the elite" on moral grounds and considers them homogeneous and antagonistic groups. Populists argue that politics should be the expression of the general will of the people and that they are the only ones to represent this will. It is too early to say that the pandemic has triggered an end to populism. Even if some populists have struggled to manage the crisis, it is not yet possible to claim that populism itself will disappear in a post-corona world. Studies argue that crises, such as the global economic downturn in 2008-09 and the surge of refugee flows in 2015, contributed to accelerate the rise of populism.

"In the longer run, populists can benefit from divisions intensified by the crisis."

Populists can take advantage and even amplify crises to mobilise supporters. During the pandemic, Brazil's president has opened parallel fronts of crises. By claiming that he is the only advocate of "the real people", Bolsonaro engaged in conflicts with governors, the parliament and courts. He attempts to drive media attention away from the COVID-19 mismanagement by making frequent polemic statements, like defending access of the population to guns. Bolsonaro mobilised his supporters to the streets against lockdown measures taken by governors and mayors and blames them for the economic recession. Despite the fast increase in cases and deaths in Brazil, Bolsonaro's approval ratings have not dropped as expected, remaining around 30 percent. None of the impeachment requests have so far thrived. US President Trump shifted the focus of crisis management to the origins of the pandemic, blaming it on China. He condemned the World Health Organisation for mismanagement and claims it is controlled by Chinese interests, a narrative that resonates among his far-right supporters and provides substance to his "America first" rhetoric.

Populists have used communication to disseminate misleading information about their performance, to offer simple solutions to complex problems, and to strengthen the centrality of the leader. Both Trump and Bolsonaro have propagated

the use of Chloroquine to treat COVID-19, despite lack of scientific evidence for its effectiveness. The Brazilian government attempted to hide the COVID-19 figures and made propaganda saying the country ranks second in the number of people cured.

The presence of populists in government undermines liberal democracy, and the current health crisis presents an opportunity for them to accelerate democratic erosion. In some cases, the emergency has been instrumental for justifying the centralisation of executive powers and for silencing the opposition and mass protests. In India, there are controversies around the use of lockdown measures to stop street protests and arrest activists. In the Philippines, President Duterte threatened to shoot those who violate confinement measures. In Poland, incumbent President Duda profited from the pandemic to undermine the political space left to the opposition during the electoral campaign.

In the longer run, populists can benefit from divisions intensified by the crisis. The rise of populism reflects cultural, social and economic grievances, which have increased in the course of decades. Support for right-wing populism benefited from rising unemployment, inequality and Euroscepticism in the past, phenomena that are likely to aggravate as consequences of the pandemic. Euroscepticism has recently risen in Italy, in close link to the lack of solidarity from the European Union at the earliest phase of the outbreak. Populists already attempt to mobilise on discontent and insecurity, denouncing the crisis as the failure of globalisation, "open borders", international organisations and liberalism. If the early prevailing logic of closing borders and putting the own nation first persists, it can legitimise long claimed populist proposals.

In the short run, populism has revealed one of its weaknesses, by displaying particularly ineffective crisis management. However, it is not clear that populism will be politically unsuccessful in the post-corona future. The ability of populists to mobilise supporters, to concentrate powers and to spread a narrative of the crisis aligned with their nationalist and authoritarian ideology should not be underestimated. They could show resilience by relying on a broader anti-globalist narrative, conspiracy theories and polarization.