

# **Introduction: Democracy versus Authoritarianism**



**Muqtedar Khan**

Professor

Department of Political Science & International Relations

University of Delaware

**Symposium on Authoritarianism and Good Governance**

Muqtedar Khan (Ed.)

International Institute of Islamic Thought | February 2021

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.47816/02.001.26>

The past decade and a half have witnessed two clearly interconnected global trends, the decline of democracy and the rise of populist, majoritarian authoritarianism. According to the Democracy Index, published by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), and the Freedom House Democracy Scores, democracy is not only in steady retreat but its quality in traditional democratic strong holds like the United States and Japan is also in decline. Both countries are now rated as flawed democracies.<sup>1</sup> In my view there are three driving forces behind these trends: (1) Economic inequity; globalization has generated winners and losers, even in rich developed nations, causing discontent with the political order resulting in strife and protests, feeding the populist trends already in place.<sup>2</sup> (2) The sudden increase in migrants and refugees who are engendering intolerance and anti-

pluralist sentiments in nations that host a large number of international migrants, especially in Western countries; public opinion driven policies against immigrants are empowering right-wing hate groups, driving up hate-crimes and thus reducing the quality of democracy in some of these nations.<sup>3</sup> (3) The rise of populism which is partly caused by the first two causes and partly by the escalation of right wing conservative ideological movements together with racial and ethno-nationalist reactions that have been festering for decades in places like Myanmar, India, Britain, France, Eastern Europe, and the United States.<sup>4</sup>

There are two types of authoritarian tendencies that are currently prevalent: (1) one trend is of existing authoritarian states becoming more authoritarian, for example China, which based on its egregious treatment

of Uyghurs and its harsh response to protests in Hong Kong, is being recognized as more authoritarian now than before.<sup>5</sup> (2) The second trend is the rise of authoritarianism in countries considered as democratic. For example, the US and India.<sup>6</sup> The first trend is lamentable because it reduces the quality of human rights for millions and increases their suffering while impeding or preventing democratization. The second trend is more worrisome because it reverses hard earned victories for democracy and it also sets a bad example for states struggling between democracy and authoritarianism.

### **Geopolitical Contest and the Competition of Governing Models**

The world is presently witnessing a geopolitical contest between the US and China for global hegemony. This is not just about who is more powerful but also whose model of governance is best.

As such, the US-China contest is a de facto competition between democratic governance and authoritarianism. Developing and fragile nations, dependent for trade and security on these superpowers, are likely to emulate the model that appears to be more successful and less messy to implement. In addition to the rise of populism, the COVID-19 pandemic has added an additional dimension to this contest. The US, with over 450,000 deaths at the time of writing this essay, does appear to be managing this crisis terribly.<sup>7</sup> There was a time when the US would have led the world against such a global pandemic, but today it cannot save its own population from a massacre. China, where the pandemic originated, in comparison looks very much in control; unlike the rest of the world whose economies have shrunk in 2020, China, according to the IMF, is the only country to post positive growth to its GDP.<sup>8</sup> This

has prompted some to question the usefulness of democracy. In December 2020, I went on the biggest Hindi News platform in India to defend the democratic model over the efficient but authoritarian model in China.<sup>9</sup> Larry Diamond too touches upon this issue in his essay in this symposium reminding us that, in fact, the nations which have best handled COVID-19 pandemic are democracies like Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and South Korea.<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, the images of treason and insurgency transmitted to the world on January 06, 2021, when an in-office President instigated a revolution against his own country sent the message that the US is spiraling down into chaos. It is no more a model of good governance or democracy, and in its current avatar certainly not worthy of emulation. I am confident that with the change in regime, the US will get back to its glory days, but at the moment

it is losing soft power like a drunken sailor at a casino.

Political scientists who study development have long held that democracy was the key to both development and good governance. Democratic forms of government, in combination with open markets, have been deemed necessary for both economic as well as political development. Some of the indicators that measure democracy, such as inclusiveness and outreach, are also measures of good governance thus making democracy and good governance overlap. However, there are some significant exceptions. While some authoritarian states rank very low on both democracy and effectiveness in governance, like Yemen and Myanmar, there are some authoritarian states that are ranked very high when it comes to effective governance. Take the case of Singapore, which is ranked #1 on

effective governance and #75 on democracy.<sup>11</sup>

There are nations like Norway, Sweden, Finland and Switzerland which are both democratic as well as effective at governance. So, let us not assume that effective governance is the sole domain of authoritarian regimes. However, since 2006, we are witnessing a retreat of democracy and a rise in authoritarianism. The meteoric ascent of China, and its ability to now project power globally, is promoting its model of authoritarian governance with mercantilist capitalism as an alternative model to democracy and free government.<sup>12</sup> Some scholars are already talking about the diffusion of the China model.<sup>13</sup>

There now appear to be two models of good governance, one based on democratic values and the other on effectiveness. The former emphasizes inclusivity, outreach, political freedoms,

as well as democratic and human rights, whereas the latter centers growth, employment, and freedom from economic distress. In this symposium on authoritarianism and governance, we wish to shed light on some aspects of the two models. As the COVID-19 pandemic rages, the contrast between the US and China is difficult to ignore. As populism and authoritarianism grow, will new challenges such as frequent pandemics and the environmental crisis privilege authoritarianism over democratic governance? Finally, the crisis of democracy in the US, so spectacularly highlighted by the Capitol Siege of January 06, 2021, makes the task of defending values-based governance more urgent than ever before.

### **On the Essays in the Symposium**

We begin the conversation with a very optimistic and robust defense of the virtues as well as durability of

democracy by Larry Diamond, who is one of the foremost scholars of democratization. In his essay, he explores the relationship between democracy and economic development along with democracy and good governance. He acknowledges that there is clearly a democracy deficit, but he also points out that overall, most of the best governed states are democracies and overtime, a vast majority of states that have registered economic development are democratic. Cases like China and Singapore where both development and authoritarianism co-exist are exceptions and not the norm. He also argues that in spite of its success, the desirability of the China model is low. People in many authoritarian states aspire for democracy. One issue that Diamond does not discuss is the possible impact of US domestic politics on the image of democracy: Will the political divisions and increasingly bad governance in the

US, highlighted by bad health care, structural racism, and domestic terrorism, take the shine off the democracy model?<sup>14</sup>

Jessica Teets, a very creative and meticulous scholar, looks at city governance and the prevalence and management of civil society institutions in China. She focusses on how civil society emerges and how it contributes to governance in authoritarian states. She advances the idea of ‘consultative governance’ to capture how China, recognizing the value of civil society groups to local governance, both permits their emergence and activities but also controls them. Essentially, the Chinese model has designed local sand boxes which confines the play of civil society institutions. As long as they provide policy-relevant and low-cost accurate information, they are allowed to operate, but if they challenge the authority of the government, they are reined in. Teets’

research finds that civil society institutions in China are providing, at least at the level of city governance, many of the benefits of democracy without democratization, perhaps giving new meaning to the term smart cities.<sup>15</sup> Teets' study of Chinese civil society institutions does raise the question about their nature. Are they extensions of the government itself—outsourcing information gathering and some policy implementation? Teets realizes that there are limits to the benefits this system provides with regards to quality of governance. Perhaps this arrangement which allows for cooperation yet remains intolerant of conflict is not consultative authoritarianism but rather a public-private partnership or even collusion in authoritarianism.

Daniel Kinderman, an interdisciplinary expert who studies the intersection of government and

business, examines the impact of authoritarianism on business. He looks at two Asian authoritarian states—China and Singapore—and two European democracies regressing towards authoritarianism—Hungary and Poland. His findings suggest that authoritarian states are able to facilitate business success and even when democracies tend towards authoritarianism, business success and innovation is not undermined. Clearly his research indicates that business can easily find common ground with authoritarian and populist regimes. As a result, we could see the return of a neo-corporatist model replacing liberal democracies if the populist trends are not checked.<sup>16</sup>

Asma Uddin, a rapidly rising scholar and public intellectual on religious freedom issues, examines the concurrent effect of political tribalism and growing authoritarian tendencies infringing upon the rights of religious

minorities, especially Muslims in the United States.<sup>17</sup> She argues that the existential anxiety that is plaguing White Christian Americans is not only intensifying institutional and social discrimination against Muslims, but it is also minimizing the violation of Muslim religious rights. Even those mainstream institutions that fight for religious rights are not free from Islamophobia. In recent years, the partnership between an increasingly authoritarian President and his Evangelical Christian base succeeded simultaneously in raising the issue of religious discrimination while supporting and implementing a ‘Muslim Ban.’ Uddin’s paper is an important reminder that under authoritarian leadership, even when religion is privileged, all religions are not treated equally.<sup>18</sup>

The final essay examines the role of technology in authoritarian governance. Social media, new digital

platforms, and technologies have been greatly appreciated for their empowerment of ordinary citizens and democratizing public narratives. As such, they have been touted for reducing the imbalance of power between state and society, especially in authoritarian states. Olga Gerasimenko, in her essay, argues that the advantage that social media gave to civil society, as witnessed particularly during the Arab Spring revolutions of 2010-2011, has dissipated. States have now acquired enhanced technological ability, launched their own information portals as well as vehicles, and are using the same technology to control and manipulate public opinion in accordance with their policies. She shows how Russia and China have weaponized the digital media to manufacture consent both at home and abroad. I think her research also has implications on the technology fetish of trends such as “smart cities and



smart governance.” The same technology can lead to “smart surveillance and smart control.”<sup>19</sup>

Zaman and Yildirim provide a very thorough and meticulously annotated bibliography of over fifty books and articles that address the topic of authoritarianism and governance. They have truly gone beyond what was expected in their 35-page, carefully vetted, and presented bibliography.<sup>20</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The goal of this research program, *Islam and Good Governance*,<sup>21</sup> inspired by my book and the theme of our first symposium,<sup>22</sup> is to discuss and encourage the role of basic universal values in governance. In this second symposium, the essays cover issues that impact the centrality or marginality of values as democracy retreats and authoritarianism ascends. However, there are clear indications that values-

based governance and democracy will eventually prevail. Diamond makes a strong case for the durability of democracy as model of good governance and also highlights its attractiveness over authoritarianism. Teets asserts that the authoritarian model works best only when it shows a democratic tolerance for civil society. Kinderman suggests that the powerful business sector might be comfortable with authoritarianism and both Uddin and Gerasimenko warn of the dangers of authoritarianism to religious freedoms and democracy in general. We hope that this symposium, which underscores some of the contours of the discourse on democratic and authoritarian systems, will further advance the debates and reflections on the merits of democracy and the dangers of authoritarianism.

## Author Bio



**Dr. Muqtedar Khan** is a Professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at the University of Delaware. He is a non-resident scholar with IIIT, coordinating the Islam and Good Governance initiative. He was the academic director of the US State Departments' National Security Institute, 2016-2019 and is the academic director of the American Foreign Policy Institute, 2019-2021, at the Institute for Global Studies, UD. He was a Senior Nonresident Fellow of the Brookings Institution (2003-2008) and a Senior Fellow with the Center for Global Policy

(2017-2020). He is the author of the award-winning book *Islam and Good Governance: Political Philosophy of Ihsan* published in April 2019 by Palgrave Macmillan. He is also the author of several other books: *American Muslims: Bridging Faith and Freedom* (2002), *Jihad for Jerusalem: Identity and Strategy in International Relations* (2004), *Islamic Democratic Discourse* (2006), *Debating Moderate Islam* (University of Utah Press, 2007). His articles and commentaries can be found at [www.ijtihad.org](http://www.ijtihad.org). His academic publications can be found at <https://udel.academia.edu/MuqtedarKhan>. He hosts a Youtube show called [Khanversations](https://www.youtube.com/c/ProfMuqtedarKhan) at: <https://www.youtube.com/c/ProfMuqtedarKhan>. Click here to read reviews, articles and view videos about [\*Islam and Good Governance: A Political Philosophy of Ihsan\*](#).

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Democracy Index can be found here on the world wide web:

<https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/> and the Freedom House ratings are here: <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores>.

<sup>2</sup> Rodrik, Dani. "Populism and the economics of globalization." *Journal of international business policy* 1, no. 1 (2018): 12-33. Guriev, Sergei. "Economic drivers of populism." In *AEA Papers and Proceedings*, vol. 108, pp. 200-203. 2018. Rodrik, Dani. *Why does globalization fuel populism? Economics, culture, and the rise of right-wing populism*. No. w27526. National Bureau of Economic Research, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Zakaria, Fareed. "Populism on the March: Why the West is in Trouble." *Foreign Affairs*, 95 (2016): 9. Brubaker, Rogers. "Between nationalism and civilizationism: the European populist moment in comparative perspective." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 8 (2017): 1191-1226.

<sup>4</sup> Krastev, Ivan. "Eastern Europe's illiberal revolution: The long road to democratic decline." *Foreign Affairs*, 97 (2018): 49. Bang, Henrik, and David Marsh. "Populism: a major threat to democracy?" *Policy Studies* 39, no. 3 (2018): 352-363. Corbridge, Stuart, and John Harris. *Reinventing India: Liberalization, Hindu nationalism and popular democracy*. John Wiley & Sons, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Carpenter, Ted Galen, "Prepare for a More Authoritarian China", The National Interest, August 03, 2019. On the World Wide Web at: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/prepare-more-authoritarian-china-70861>

<sup>6</sup> Vajpeyi, Ananya. "Minorities and Populism in Modi's India: The Mirror Effect." In *Minorities and Populism—Critical Perspectives from South Asia and Europe*, pp. 17-28. Springer, Cham, 2020. Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart. *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*. Cambridge University Press, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Data provided by worldometer.com on January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/us/>

<sup>8</sup> See IMF report: <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-10-13/World-GDP-to-drop-4-4-in-2020-IMF--UyNuoUIFIC/index.html>

<sup>9</sup> This interview can be heard here: <https://www.aajtak.in/podcast/best-podcasts-in-hindi/audio/if-india-really-has-too-much-democracy-1175535-2020-12-11>

<sup>10</sup> See Larry Diamond, "Regime Type and Effective Government: Is There (Still) a 'Democracy Advantage'?" in Muqtedar Khan (Ed.) *Symposium on Authoritarianism and Good Governance* (VA: IIIT, 2021). On the web at: <https://iiit.org/en/regime-type-and-effective-government/>

<sup>11</sup> See the EIU report cited in end note #1 for the democracy rankings and see this report on the world wide web for efficiency ranking:

[https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/wb\\_government\\_effectiveness/](https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/wb_government_effectiveness/)

<sup>12</sup> Fukuyama, Francis. "Exporting the Chinese model." *Project Syndicate* 12 (2016).  
Halper, Stefan. *The Beijing consensus: how China's authoritarian model will dominate the twenty-first century*. ReadHowYouWant.com, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Ambrosio, Thomas. "The rise of the 'China Model' and 'Beijing Consensus': evidence of authoritarian diffusion?." *Contemporary Politics* 18, no. 4 (2012): 381-399.

<sup>14</sup> See Larry Diamond, "Regime Type and Effective Government: Is There (Still) a 'Democracy Advantage'?" in Muqtedar Khan (Ed.) *Symposium on Authoritarianism and Good Governance* (VA: IIIT, 2021).

On the web at: <https://iiit.org/en/regime-type-and-effective-government/>

<sup>15</sup> See Jessica Teets, "Consultative Authoritarianism: The Key to Good Governance in China?" in Muqtedar Khan (Ed.) *Symposium on Authoritarianism and Good Governance* (VA: IIIT, 2021). On the World Wide Web at:

<https://iiit.org/en/consultative-authoritarianism-the-key-to-good-governance-in-china/>

<sup>16</sup> See Daniel Kinderman, "Authoritarian Capitalism and its Impact on Business" in Muqtedar Khan (Ed.) *Symposium on Authoritarianism and Good Governance* (VA: IIIT, 2021). On the World Wide Web at: <https://iiit.org/en/authoritarian-capitalism-and-its-impact-on-business/>

<sup>17</sup> Uddin, Asma T. *When Islam is Not a Religion*. Simon and Schuster, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Asma Uddin, "Impact of Authoritarian Trends and Political Tribalism on American Muslims," in Muqtedar Khan (Ed.) *Symposium on Authoritarianism and Good Governance* (VA: IIIT, 2021). On the World Wide Web at: <https://iiit.org/en/impact-of-authoritarian-trends-and-political-tribalism-on-muslim-minorities-in-the-us/>.

<sup>19</sup> Olga Gerasimenko, "The Weaponization of Digital Media in the Service of Authoritarianism," in Muqtedar Khan (Ed.) *Symposium on Authoritarianism and Good Governance* (VA: IIIT, 2021). On the World Wide Web at: <https://iiit.org/en/the-weaponization-of-digital-media-in-the-service-of-authoritarianism/>

<sup>20</sup> Fahmida Zaman and Sumeyra Yildirim, "Authoritarianism and Good Governance: An Annotated Bibliography," in Muqtedar Khan (Ed.) *Symposium on Authoritarianism and Good Governance* (VA: IIIT, 2021). On the World Wide Web at:

<sup>21</sup> Muqtedar Khan, *Islam and Good Governance: A Political Philosophy of Ihsan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

<sup>22</sup> Muqtedar Khan (Ed.) *Symposium on Islam and Good Governance* (VA: IIIT, 2020), on the World Wide Web at: <https://iiit.org/en/symposium-on-islam-and-good-governance/>