

COMMENTS AND LETTERS

Pandemics and democracies

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COVID-19 shakes up democracies. Dictatorships react more easily to the pandemic, yet, democracy remains the best form of government.

Is COVID-19 dividing society? At the end of November, 62 per cent of the Swiss – as a pure democracy – voted in favour of stricter COVID rules.

Or take the recent German parliamentary elections: the SPD (Social Democrats) got 206 seats, the CDU/CSU (Christian Democrats) 197. With only nine seats difference, the SPD provides the chancellor. Are Switzerland or Germany divided?

No, these societies simply live the principle of democracy: the majority decides. Nuclear deterrence – yes or no; EU enlargement to the east – yes or no; euro – yes or no. Political issues often seem to divide. Still, with a result of 51 to 49 per cent, the majority rules, whereas minorities can always form majorities by convincing people.

At first glance, autocratic regimes naturally contain an epidemic more easily than democracies. In China, anyone infected must immediately spend quarantine under strict house arrest. Then everything in the wider area is shut down. There is no freedom of movement, opinion, or choice – the top decision-maker calls the shots. China is quite proud of this harsh method.

Individualism versus collectivism: should we also become totalitarian to contain the pandemic? Because of the crisis, democracies are tottering, therefore, it is more important than ever to defend them.

Democracies are pluralistic; diversity of opinions must, as it is often said, “be endured”, which sounds as if totalitarianism is better. That’s when it’s necessary to remember the outstanding achievement that we enjoy the freedom and compete to find the best solution and convince each other.

In our constitutions, we have guaranteed rights such as free-



People queue for a swab test for COVID-19 in Beijing, China. At first glance, autocratic regimes naturally contain an epidemic more easily than democracies. PHOTO: AFP

dom of expression and, in most, human dignity is inviolable. Our state does not lock us up if we express our disagreements. You definitely can’t afford that in autocracies.

Sure, in democracies, the opinion-forming process takes longer as we discuss and weigh up. Lobbyists represent their positions, committees and boards meet. This takes time, hence, we sometimes cannot act as quickly.

This snail’s pace in democracies is a price for freedom but it usually has its qualities. That’s why we must also trust those in leadership, especially when the pandemic demands quick decisions because the majority has mandated them.

The question of the pros and cons of compulsory vaccination is divisive and debated by society – in the form of numerous parties, groups, individual voices as well as innumerable forums such as the media, internet channels and parliaments.

COVID-19 is a global, highly contagious disease. Fortunately, it is not as deadly as Ebola. The virus is constantly learning and mutating. We should defend against it collectively, as a society, not just as a multitude of a few. A pandemic is not a private matter. Every

individual has a duty to prevent harm to the community.

The vaccine, which is a blessing, is also the only known chance so far to also protect society and, thus, humanity and our prosperity, and bring the situation under control. This collective idea is compatible with democracy. Democracy does not mean that we all have to be of one opinion; that would also be illusory.

Accordingly, compulsory vaccination for the common good would also be democrati-

cally justifiable. Ultimately, the interests of public health, the health system, infrastructure and the economy collide with the individual’s freedom.

Even if the vaccination becomes a legal obligation in some democracies, nobody will be physically forced to take it as in a dictatorship, but would have to accept the penalties.

In the end, we are not alone in the world; we can’t act selfishly. We are part of a civilised community: we need the refuse collector, post person, chimney sweep and certainly the nurse from time to time. Precisely because people surround us, it depends on all of us.

Nature has us in its grip and shows us through the virus that we cannot control it without limits. A tiny little thing, invisible to the naked eye, holds billions at bay. It pushes states to the limits of their resilience. This realisation awakens the call for strength, for we must defend ourselves, united!

Democrats like to call democracy “defensible”. Right now, it seems more necessary to call it “worth protecting”, like a rare white elephant. To protect democracy, we should remember one of the essences of democracy: there are no

rights without duties. Alongside self-realisation and self-determination, individualism and our many freedom rights we also have responsibilities.

Minorities are important and not to be treated badly, that is a question of culture. We don’t have to share the majority’s opinion but the minority must respect their decisions. Majority or minority, a democracy only works as an interplay of majorities.

Let us be aware of how hard democracy was won and how bad it would be for everyone and the next generations to live in a dictatorship. Democracy requires commitment. Those who do not want to live under a dictator, or a ruling clique, should recognise that the majority’s decisions apply to everyone. We, including the aggressive demonstrators, would be shocked if democracy were suddenly gone.

To quote Winston Churchill: “No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”

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