Coronavirus Times in Turkey: Contemplating the Concept of Governance Under the Shadow of a Despotic Leviathan

Prof. Dr. Emre Erdoğan
Istanbul Bilgi University

Emre Erdoğan (Prof.) has been lecturing on social statistics, research methods and advanced research methods at Istanbul Bilgi University since 2005. He is the Acting Head of the Department of International Relations. With a doctoral degree in Political Science from Boğaziçi University, he has served as researcher and senior consultant in various projects in academia and civil society. His research focuses on political participation, foreign policy and public opinion, child and youth well-being, methodology and statistics. He studies Syrian refugee youth in Turkey in terms of social, educational, and economic integration. He is also extensively working on othering, polarization and populism and publishes about these topics.

It looks like the Coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19) is going to leave a much deeper mark than previous pandemics did on what David Harvey calls our present world of time-space compression. As of April 20, 2020,[1] the infection has been identified in close to 2,500,000 people and the number of deaths has surpassed 165,000. Social life is being restricted through various measures in many countries[2] in order to combat the contagion. According to international authorities, the economic effects of the pandemic are going to be widespread. The IMF has dubbed the pandemic the "Worst Economic Downturn Since the Great Depression",[3] various sources anticipate an economic shrinkage[4] of up to 35% in the next three months and it is estimated[5] that up to 8% of the world's population will face fresh poverty, hence the progress made in the fight against poverty over the last 10 years will be wiped out. Confronted with a devastation of such magnitude, governments are observed trying to respond to the economic effects of the pandemic with economic stimulus packages[6] reaching up to 20% of their gross domestic product; the extent to which this effort will ameliorate the damage however, is uncertain. While some studies concerning scenarios for our country predict a possible shrinkage[7] of up to 17%, it is estimated that 3,000,000 people will lose their jobs, the unemployment rate will rise to 25%[8] and the youth unemployment rate will hit 40%.[9] It is clear[10] that those working in the informal sector, seasonal agricultural workers and most importantly Syrian immigrants are also going to be affected by all the aspects of this pandemic. It is possible that a devastation of such scale will also radically alter people's perspectives on the world and their values.

All of this data suggests that states are facing the most important challenge of the current era. While it does not seem possible that the pandemic will completely end in the short term, it is inevitable that the number of active cases and deaths will reach a "plateau", economic and social life will reopen –even if not to the extent it used to be– and the performances of governments will come under scrutiny. Seats of power that seemed unshakable and governments

that were thought not to be at risk of being overthrown only a year ago may fall under the Covid-19 storm, while we will perhaps witness the birth of fresh actors who speak to the newly emerged priorities. In the post-pandemic world, a new globalization and form of foreign integration may be born, or a rise of new authoritarian regimes along with "corona-nationalism" may be at hand. It is not easy to provide a clear prediction regarding this while the pandemic and quarantines continue. On the other hand, all debates on a "post-corona" utopia/dystopia will be influenced by the marks left behind by the pandemic and the level of success of existing regimes in fighting the contagion, or more accurately, the perception of voters regarding the same.

The question we need to ask is this: how do we determine whether a government is successful or not in the face of a pandemic of such proportions? While it may seem like there is an objective answer to this question, in fact the answer will inevitably be influenced by the political stance, worldview and party preference of the person responding. Since, as a result of the pandemic, millions of people have become sick, hundreds of thousands are facing death and even those who have recovered have to live with health issues caused by the disease, it appears there can be no other priority than human health. This is especially so when we begin to view every statistic as a human being; a mother/father/child/friend. From this perspective, minimizing the number of people afflicted at the end of the pandemic should be a priority for governments and therefore must be thought of as a criterion of success.
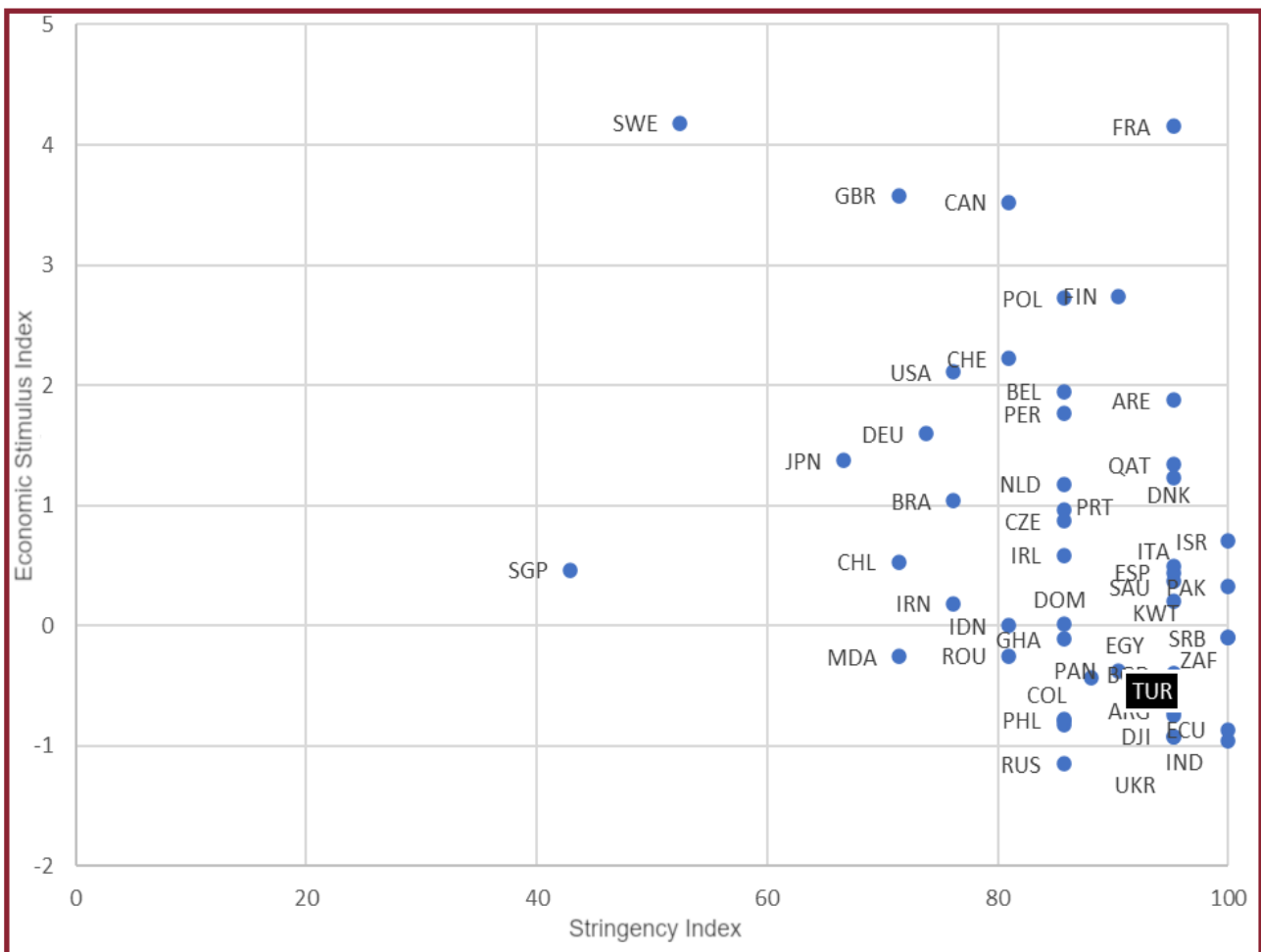

Figure 1. Country Economic Stimulus and Policy Stringency Indexes

As the numbers I have quoted above demonstrate however, the pandemic is poised to cause great devastation not only in the lives of people but also in the economy. It is therefore claimed that the effect that measures implemented to fight the virus will have on the psychological health of the people will be very negative as well. There are studies[11] showing that the economic crisis will negatively affect people's mental health, increase suicides along with heart attacks and similar health problems and in the medium term negatively affect the health of many more people. Relying on this data, some politicians point to the importance of preventing the pandemic from damaging the economy. In many countries, there is both a political will and a public demand for restrictions to be lifted as soon as possible and for at least economic damage to be prevented. We must accept recent demonstrations[12] in the USA as a concrete manifestation of this demand.

As has partially been analyzed in present debates, not many countries have situated themselves on both ends of the health-economic policy index. The above graph has been compiled from two separate sources. The X-axis is based on the Stringency Index created by codifying public health policies that countries have implemented against the Covid-19 pandemic. It ranges from 0 to 100 and indicates[13] the application of the sum of policy measures for the purpose of preventing the spread of the contagion, such as school closures and travel restrictions. The Y-axis shows the financial measures taken by the same countries; higher scores indicate[14] more economic measures being implemented by a government. France stands out as a country that is both taking many precautions simultaneously and implementing numerous economic measures. Sweden on the other hand, as everyone knows by now, is a country with a milder lockdown but is not tight-fisted about economic measures. While there are countries such as Singapore that are below average on both axes, there are also examples like Turkey, Ecuador, Argentina, Russia and India where despite many lockdown measures being in place, economic measures are lower than in other countries.

Regarding economic measures, the financial strength of the country in question comes into play; according to the analysis conducted by those who compiled the data,[15] the size of the economic measures taken by a country is related to its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and the number of cases in the country. In other words, richer countries are more able to intervene in the economy. Meanwhile, there is no relationship between economic measures and the Stringency Index.

The extent to which governments are taking measures, or more accurately, the extent to which they are able to take measures, is another matter of debate. Because the pandemic is still at the stage of spreading, it is too early to say which kind of factors will lead to more successful policymaking and evaluations based on total number of cases or deaths can be misleading. Furthermore, because almost every country has unique characteristics, an assessment based on general categories cannot be made either. While the performances of democracies such as South Korea and Taiwan are thought to be relatively good, the damage caused by the disease is perceived to be more destructive in other democracies such as the USA, Italy and Spain. While an authoritarian regime like China has been able to apply measures in a harsher manner, another authoritarian regime, Iran, can be said to have faced a much greater devastation. While there is a perception that populist leaders cannot be successful in fighting the contagion, when we look at the example of India, there are those who assert that despite fewer tests, it is relatively more successful.[16] On this very matter, we need to point out that the statistics which the definition of "success" relies on can also contain some biases. There is also the claim[17] that numbers shared by governments are misrepresenting the truth. In conclusion, these kinds of quantitative comparisons may not be that veritable.

For this reason, it may be more accurate to focus on processes as well, instead of only outputs, when it comes to facts like the pandemic at hand which has the potential to lead to radical changes. Our responses to an event of this magnitude, the policies we create and more importantly the way we produce policies determine not only our performance regarding that issue but our lives afterwards as well. Great historical events influence the shaping of the question "how is it to be done?" in the memories of humans and become instructive in solving problems faced in the future too. For example, the damage caused by the lack of an international intervention mechanism in the 1929 Crisis had led to the foundation of the Bretton Woods institutions after 1945. Likewise, we can associate the founding of the United Nations with World War II. Today, the perception regarding the failure of the WHO or the European Union[18] institutions to intervene in the fight against the pandemic seems to be poised to determine the future of transnational institutions and our form of governance in the days after the coronavirus – an intensely debated[19] issue.

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The Pandemic Policy of a Country is Determined by its Political Institutions

Ruptures can be expected to take place concerning debates on post-pandemic governance not only on the transnational level but also within national borders. Even without much success in identifying the factors that decide the success of policy preferences of countries, we may dwell on how these preferences diverge. Using the typology developed by Acemoglu and Robinson in their book titled "The Narrow Corridor" (2020) may be inspirational for this thought process. Acemoglu and Robinson's typology rests on a tension between the state and society. While the power of the state lies on one axis, the power of society lies on the other. One of the examples used in the books is China; this type of state, which the authors dub "Despotic Leviathan", completely dominates society, with almost no influence of society on the state to speak of. In the Despotic Leviathan type, development or economic growth becomes possible, however is unable to be sustained due to corruption. In the second type, due to local power centers preventing the formation of a centralized state, we find a state that is unable to provide even the simplest services; this is called an "Absent Leviathan". Meanwhile, in the "Shackled Leviathan" type of structure which are exemplified by the USA and the UK, a situation is reached where both elements are strengthened as a result of a mutual tug-of-war between the state and society; the authors describe this situation as "the meeting of the top and bottom blades of the scissor". There is also a "Paper Leviathan" not included in the graphic, which is a hybrid of the Despotic and Absent types where despotic power is exercised over citizens.

First of all, that China was able, albeit late, in the fight against the pandemic, to bring the contagion under control by applying a complete quarantine, and doing so while ignoring the economic losses entailed, is to a large extent due to its capability of acting as a Despotic Leviathan. The complete domination of China's administration over society and the electronic surveillance[20] mechanisms that it has already implemented resulted in people's obedience regardless of the cost incurred by the
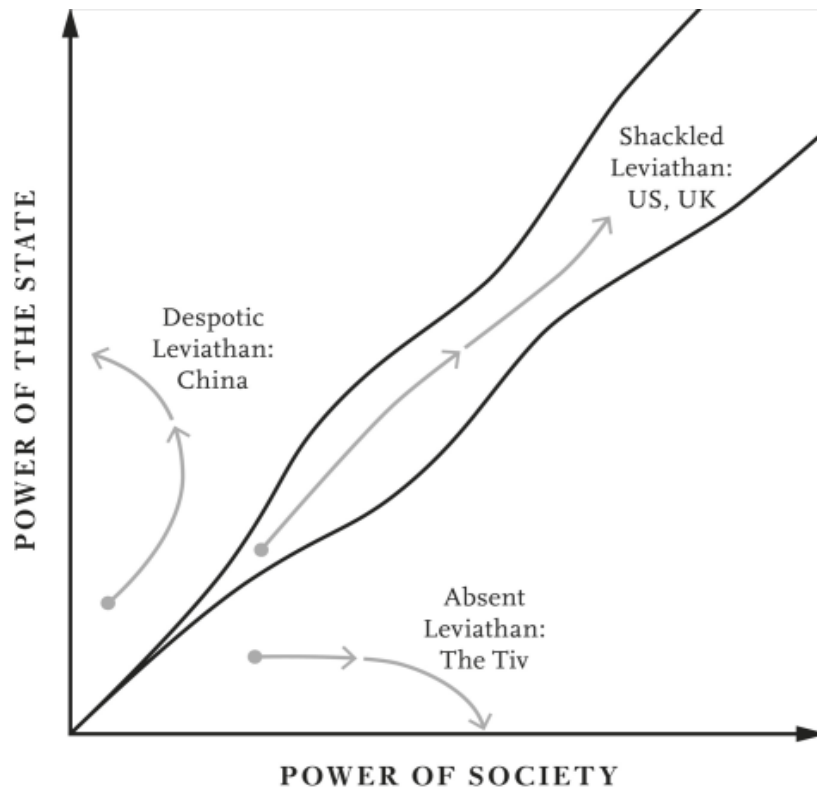
Figure 2. The Development of Despotic, Shackled and Absent Leviathans

Source: Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, 2019. *The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies and the Fate of Liberty.* Penguin Press: New York. p.78

measures. In addition, China's form of government which does not care about freedom of thought led both to information about the contagion being easily concealed and manipulated, and to silencing[21] of potential dissident voices. This in turn resulted in policies that could have been deemed too strict in other contexts to be easily implemented.

Regarding the Absent Leviathan area of the graphic, we may point to Sub-Saharan African countries as examples of this typology. Even though the pandemic has not directly threatened Africa yet –25,000 cases have been detected and there are 1,200 deaths– the number of cases is expected to surpass tens of millions within the next 6 months. Experts agree[22] that the health systems of countries in this region, which has suffered from poverty, hunger and internal conflicts for a very long time, do not have the capacity to meet a pandemic like this. For example, Kenya, which has a population of 50,000,000, has around 200 intensive care beds. The number of intensive care beds per 100,000 people in the Republic of South Africa is 2, while in the much-criticized USA, it's 34. Most of these countries are not in a state where they can do enough tests and they are struggling in terms of number of doctors and healthcare personnel. Neither do they have an economic infrastructure to sustain education or work life in case of a decision to lock down. Under the conditions of this lack of capacity, while governments from time to time attempt to impose quarantine on society through very radical measures, their efforts do not turn out very successful and life goes on as usual outside of large cities. Because society doesn't have the capacity to make up for the shortcomings of the state in this area either, most African countries are intensely dependent on foreign aid and international cooperation in the fight against the pandemic. Since these efforts will also be carried out, however, by state instruments that are in any case insufficient, it is feared[23] that their contribution will be limited.

The situation in the USA and the UK which are presented as examples of the Shackled Leviathan by Acemoglu and Robinson is more complicated. We observed a series of policy choices that changed over time in these two countries that are governed by populist leaders and faced the pandemic in a setting where society was polarized by the US presidential elections or critical political decisions like Brexit. In both countries, the deadly effect of the pandemic was at first underestimated and even ignored. Both Trump and Johnson have made numerous statements on how the magnitude of the disease would not be like the experts were supposedly exaggeratedly suggesting. Furthermore, in the UK, protecting economic activity was preferred at the cost of 200,000 –mostly old– people dying through a policy called "Herd Immunity", however, once the gravity of the situation was recognized, this policy was changed.[24] Meanwhile in the USA, the initial policy of denial was abandoned[25] in favor of a series of applications that experts have dubbed "panic and chaos". The political polarization in the country leads to every decision taken being evaluated through partisan lenses and prioritization of short-term preferences of politicians. While the Johnson government in the UK perforce cooperated with scientists and academic institutions, pandemic policies in the USA are determined among squabbles between Trump, states, scientists and federal institutions. Acemoglu states[26] that Trump's polarizing and populist policies have damaged federal institutions and turned the country into a dysfunctional Paper Leviathan. Since the skeptical approach of populist politicians towards science and expertise is known, this policy choice does not appear so surprising. Especially in a country like the USA where science denialism exemplified by opposition to vaccines and the theory of evolution already overlaps with a partisan[27] divide, such a preference becomes a lot less costly. Viewed from this perspective, we can say that in the UK, the relative power of "the lower blade of the scissors", meaning society, was effective in influencing policies whereas in the USA these mechanisms did not operate due to polarized politics and populist governmental preferences. This in turn leads to the state being unable to fulfill its function.

Before delving into the Paper Leviathan discussion, we should briefly touch upon the experiences of two countries. Germany appears to have performed well in the fight against the pandemic under Chancellor Merkel's government and it is said that widespread testing and a comprehensive isolation strategy lie at the root of this success. Furthermore, the fact that the country's health system is more prepared than other countries –with 29 intensive care beds per 100,000 people– is among the factors that must be taken into consideration. However, the way Germany's health policy is made is also different than other countries. Merkel collaborates with the prestigious Robert Koch Institute[28] and similar academic research institutions in the policymaking process; in other words, she cares about expertise. While the high financial and the functional capacity of the federal state ensures that policies are effective, the absence of a USA or UK-style polarization prevents debates from becoming means of partisan politics. Merkel's person and her policies both, seem to have created a social consensus; her approval rating is at its all-time high.[29] She owes this success to the strong state that has been created within The Narrow Corridor.

Another country we need to look at is Sweden. This country, which is presented by Acemoglu and Robinson in their book as an example in which the capacities of the state and society have risen together, is following a strategy in the fight against the pandemic that is different than all European countries. The strategy relies on Swedes being "self-disciplined and highly trusting of others and their institutions". Anders Tegnell who leads the Public Health Agency of Sweden, which the government fully defers to, prefers the path of isolating vulnerable groups like the elderly while society acquires immunity on its own. This policy has up to now led to nearly 2,000 people dying, which is almost five times as high as the death rate in Denmark. While the government, which generally respects the

separation of powers prescribed by the political system in Sweden, has tightened measures in the face of such growing numbers, even these new measures can be said to be quite lax in comparison to those in other countries.[30] We may say that the excessive respect of political actors for the autonomy of institutions and the technocracy has backfired.

The critical role of state capacity in the fight to reduce the speed of the spread of the virus reveals that many countries will end up as Paper Leviathans. Among Central American countries, Ecuador[31] may be the most extreme example in this category. While according to official numbers, only about 500 people have died from the coronavirus, it is said that there are actually thousands of dead in only one city. Meanwhile the government has not taken any effective measures and instead has intensified policing, claiming the pandemic is "a hoax perpetrated by virtual networks". Furthermore, wages of public employees were cut in order to meet the requirements of an IMF agreement. It is hard to say the priority of this policy preference is human health in a period in which many countries are providing financial support to employees, employers and the unemployed. It is stated that the goal of these government policies is to destroy the socialist-leaning legacy of the previous administration; there are those who believe[32] the foundations of an authoritarian state are being laid in this process.

The Development of Policies to Fight the Pandemic in Turkey does not Take Place through a Participatory Method that is Open to Dialogue

This small tour we made using Acemoglu and Robinson's typology showed that the form taken by the relation between the state and society and the kind of Leviathan that exists determine the methods of fighting the coronavirus pandemic. With that in mind, it will be useful to evaluate the policy preferences in place in our country within this perspective as well. In their book, Acemoglu and Robinson place Turkey on the Despotic Leviathan side of the divide and argue that the opportunity to "enter the corridor" that emerged in the early 2000s was missed. Acemoglu stated[33] in an interview that civil society, the media and the economy are weak in Turkey and that there are no independent checks and balances. It is known that the state is very strong vis-a-vis society in Turkey and a "patrimonial"[34] form of government prevails. Developments that took place in the recent period –the July 15 Coup Attempt and the State of Emergency that followed– have especially reinforced the power of the state/government and there are those who qualify this from a certain point of view as having paved the way to a regime of "competitive authoritarianism".[35] To this we may also add the populist[36] style of politics frequently observed in Turkey and other countries where direct contact with the people is preferred over intervention in politics through the use of mediating institutions. On top of the transformation that took place in the institutional structure in Turkey, political polarization,[37] which leads individuals to make their political preferences almost entirely through partisan lenses, must also be included in the picture. In a polarized political environment, both policy preferences and institutions are evaluated within the framework of political belonging and since individuals live within their own "Echo Chambers" and don't get exposed to different opinions, they do not reach compromises; every difference of political opinion turns into a moral debate.

As of April 23, 2020, with more than 100,000 cases and 2,491 deaths, Turkey is one of the countries where the effects of the pandemic are most felt in the world. The total number of deaths/cases is about 2% according to official numbers, which is quite lower[38] than France and the UK's 10% rates – countries which can be counted among the most effective in fighting the contagion. Even though the

reliability of these numbers is a matter of debate,[39] we must state that this debate itself is influenced by political polarization and that, as in examples of other countries, both supporters of the government and supporters of the opposition prefer numbers that reinforce their own arguments.

A two-layer strategy is being followed in Turkey in the fight against the pandemic. The Health Minister, whose role was redefined in the presidential system that came into effect following the 2017 Referendum to become a "Health Secretary" is at the head of the effort to fight the contagion. In the parliamentary system before 2017, ministers were mostly picked from among members of parliament and were subject to a vote of confidence in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (TBMM). A minister who quit their duty, if they were a member of parliament, would return to the ranks of representatives and continue to hold on to their identity as a politician. In the present system, ministers are appointed and removed by the President; the parliament cannot intervene. Just like most of the other ministers, Dr. Fahrettin Koca does not have a political past; he has assumed the duty of Health Minister following a career of managing a chain of hospitals that he owns. In this sense, he can be seen as a technocrat; he has assumed his office not through his political contacts but as a result of his knowledge about the field. The Health Minister is directing the fight against the contagion together with the members of the Science Council which he formed, while the necessary political decisions are taken by the cabinet led by the President and are implemented mostly without being presented to parliament for approval.

While the appositeness of the policies is guaranteed by the Health Minister's personality as a technocrat and the scientific competency of the Science Council, their legitimacy is provided by the will of the people as embodied in the person of the President. The "war" against the pandemic is left completely to the field of executive power and no checks and balances mechanism is in operation.

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We know that the basic motivation for the switch to the Presidential Government System (to refer to it by its authentic name) was to be able to produce more rapid responses. The belief that a governmental system which could not be bogged down by the TBMM and intermediary institutions was needed to be able to intervene in the "matter of survival" of the country which became concrete especially in the July 15 Coup Attempt, the conflict in Syria, the 2018 Financial Crisis and similar emergencies resulted in a transition seen in very few other countries. In examples such as the Elazığ earthquake that took place at the beginning of this year, the phrase "a state that can move as quick as a corporation" was used frequently to demonstrate the effectiveness of the new system. The emergence of a strategy for fighting the contagion that relies solely on the executive branch is therefore not surprising. It is perhaps also understandable that the government does not require the opinions of the opposition or independent institutions in this process because with elections having become a struggle of life and death, the government and the opposition have lost their common ground. Actors who, in a parliamentary system, of necessity have to cooperate on some issues, currently do not need each other in any sort of way.

A government far removed from the control of a system of checks and balances, that does not require the recommendations of non-governmental organizations or the opposition which may have its

own agenda, can act quickly; that is true. It is also known that the government quickly implemented policies starting from March 13, 2020 when the first bans were put in place and that it rapidly shifted policies when needed; this "agility" is probably one of the reasons the death rate is low. As mentioned earlier however, this kind of governance focuses only on the outcome and the marginalization of both the opposition and other social elements in the process turns the pandemic entirely into a great referendum and contributes to political polarization.

We observed such a polarization in the case of the curfew that was rapidly implemented on April 10, 2020; there was a major rupture especially between supporters of the government and the opposition regarding the appropriateness/uselessness/counterproductivity of the decision. The central government's suspension of local initiatives such as donation drives, aid distribution services or hospital constructions implemented in metropolitan cities held by the opposition turned into a similar social fissure. The authenticity of the numbers declared by the Health Ministry is already being judged through the partisan belongings of individuals. Social media does not overcome this divergence, to the contrary, it reinforces polarization by easing the spread of fake news. All these factors actually transform the pandemic, which ought to unite all of us on a common ground, into a historical experience that divides us even further. This is being determined not only by our policy preferences but by the point our institutional history has brought us to.

If our only priority is to emerge out of this pandemic with minimum damage in terms of the economy or public health, this one-sided strategy could perhaps have made our job easier. However, as is the case in every kind of crisis moment, there isn't only a single path that reaches the desired outcome and the priorities of a single political authority may not fully embrace the whole society. In the US example, the tension between urbanites advocating for extending the quarantine and the rural citizens who demand workplaces be reopened as soon as possible is close to breaking out into armed conflict. There are segments of society in our country too, who are harmed by the policies currently in place and there are even those who are left out of the scope of the policies altogether; we can count those working in the informal sector, seasonal agricultural workers and Syrians among them. There are also those who will be unable to protect themselves through physical distancing or similar measures when we return to our daily lives – or the new normal. Including different segments of society in policymaking too would not only make the reaching of social consensus easier; taking into account the priorities of these segments would also contribute to the forming of agreement and common rationality.

As Nobel Prize in Economics laureate Amartya Sen[40] has stated, following the guidance of central government which has a great capacity for intervention may be key to success in a struggle of this scale; however, the inclusion of the opposition, local governments and non-governmental organizations in decision making processes both ensures diversity of social priorities and leads, through consent, to policies being implemented more effectively. Most important of all, this would make it possible to emerge from the state of crisis we are in with both the capacity of the state and the capabilities of civil society enhanced in the long term.

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