

# Democracy is Critical to Combatting Coronavirus

**BRIEFING BY: DR. DANIEL TWINING, *President***

U.S. HOUSE FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE  
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Thank you, Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, and distinguished Members of the Committee for the chance to present to you today. All of us at IRI appreciate your support for strong American leadership in the world at a time when authoritarians are exploiting the coronavirus emergency as a political weapon to weaken democracy and undercut American interests in a free and open world.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global health crisis that is also a political crisis. Marshalling an effective humanitarian response while maintaining security and creating the conditions for economic recovery will put unprecedented strain on even the most resilient political systems.

U.S. leaders are rightly focused on bolstering our health system and preserving our economy. Yet this crisis also requires a long-term response that puts democracy at its core. Democratic institutions are vital to preventing future pandemics, resisting the influence of our geopolitical rivals, and securing long-term economic and social recovery. Targeted foreign assistance that incorporates both direct humanitarian relief and long-term support for democratic institutions—particularly for the most vulnerable and fragile democracies and those targeted by malign influence campaigns—can protect U.S. interests and help restore global security and prosperity.

Our history is replete with examples of Americans turning inward in the face of threats from overseas, but this would be a mistake. Generations of American leaders have learned the hard way that withdrawing from world affairs exposes our nation to greater peril. This pandemic is no exception. It will tempt many Americans to argue for diverting strategic foreign assistance to support domestic responses. This would only leave our country more exposed as foreign nations fail to manage the crisis and as America's great-power competitors expand their influence at U.S. expense.

We are only in the early stages of this crisis. Already, we are seeing that governments grounded in accountability, transparency, rule of law and citizen-centered governance are best positioned both to respond to the immediate crisis and to create enduring conditions for social stability and economic recovery not susceptible to authoritarian overreach. Conversely, history suggests that if

democratic institutions crack under the strain of this pandemic, we can expect to see a range of new threats to global stability and U.S. interests.

Capable democracies including South Korea and Taiwan have managed the medical emergency and sustained citizen trust. By contrast, China and Russia have repressed medical information, suppressed and imprisoned civil society voices, and peddled disinformation campaigns designed to exploit divisions in Western democracies. Authoritarian powers are also using this crisis as an excuse to centralize power at home.

Around the world, we see COVID-19 threatening nations that have been on the path to democratic success. From Ethiopia to Tunisia, societies in lockdown will experience major economic contractions. Democracy assistance will help enable partners to deliver a more effective response and thereby push back against populist authoritarian appeals. From Colombia to Mongolia, leaders are trying to manage the crisis in ways that keep democratic institutions functioning and responding to citizens' needs. Whether they can do so will shape the trajectory of their countries and their effectiveness as American partners.

While our response to the pandemic must focus on strengthening health systems and public health capabilities, these efforts must be paired with support for transparent, accountable, citizen-centric governance that reduces opportunities for corrupt authorities to bungle vital public health responses. We know that democracies are more responsive and accountable to their citizens, are more resilient to malign foreign influence, make more reliable allies, and ensure the United States does not speak alone when advocating for unalienable rights around the world.

America's global competitors stand ready to exploit these dynamics to advance their geostrategic position and to weaken ours. We cannot let the pandemic cause the United States to shrink from a global leadership role. By investing in democratic development, the U.S. can respond effectively to this unprecedented global health challenge, create the conditions for global recovery, and minimize the opportunities for authoritarian states like China to turn this crisis to their advantage.

Dictatorship kills: authoritarian corruption and repression helped transform COVID from a localized epidemic to a global pandemic in which China's unelected Communist Party leadership is complicit. Now Chinese leaders are running a global campaign of misinformation that aims to weaponize COVID against the United States and its democratic allies.

Coronavirus lays bare the threat that authoritarian states like China pose. By suppressing information, dismantling civil society, and pumping out disinformation, these regimes endanger Americans at home and abroad. Democracy assistance can check their influence, giving both governments and civil society in vulnerable nations the tools to expose and resist disinformation.

As it always has been, America's global leadership is required. Strategic investments in the democratic resilience of allies and partners will be essential to containing COVID-19, mitigating its consequences at home and abroad, and ensuring that the United States is positioned to maximize its strategic advantage and retain its indispensable leadership role.

*\*A version of this argument appeared in The Hill newspaper, co-authored with IRI's Patrick Quirk*