

# COVID-19 and Digital Repression in Africa

By Hisham Aidi

## Abstract

The current global pattern of democratic retrenchment has multiple causes, including economic inequality, American imperial overreach, and increased migration, all of which have led to disillusionment with democratic systems, and inspired a populist demand for populist leaders. This populist wave has also led to the personalization of political regimes, democratic and authoritarian, with power highly concentrated in the hands of a single individual, as seen in Turkey, Philippines, Poland, Russia and on the African continent as well. The COVID-19 pandemic has been exploited by African regimes to crack down on opposition movements, promote disinformation, and surveil citizenry. Lockdowns in Africa have been violently enforced to ban political gatherings and electoral campaigning."

## Introduction

On July 25, the president of Tunisia, Kais Saied, dismissed the prime minister, froze parliament, and declared that he would rule by decree. He put in place a thirty-day curfew, and invoked Article 80 of the Tunisian constitution, granting him power to address, "imminent danger to statehood, national security and the country's independence." Tunisia's political crisis, scholars of democratic de-consolidation would argue, has multiple causes—a listless economy, a polarized party system, widespread corruption and so on<sup>1</sup>. This discussion will focus on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and how its multiple facets—economic, political,

and digital—have eroded democratic governance in Tunisia and elsewhere in Africa.

Because of parliamentary gridlock, a decrepit health sector, and political favoritism, an estimated 20,000 Tunisians have died of COVID-19, an alarming rate for a country of 11.7 million. The stage for the current crisis was set by discontent over government handling of the pandemic and increased surveillance. In June 2020, then prime minister Elias Fakhfakh stated that the Tunisian government was tracking people's movements anonymously through their SIM cards to monitor compliance with COVID-19 quarantine restrictions. The Ministry of Health subsequently confirmed the adoption

of contact-tracing phone apps that collect people's phone numbers and GPS locations. It was then revealed that Rachid El Ghannouchi, speaker of Tunisia's parliament and head of the Ennahda party, was being targeted for surveillance using the NSO group's Pegasus spyware<sup>2</sup>.

It is ironic that this political imbroglio, involving digital surveillance, is unfolding in Tunisia, which ten years ago was the birthplace of the Arab Spring and the first Twitter Revolution, held up as evidence that the internet was a 'liberation technology' that could bring down dictatorships. A decade later, analysts are speaking of digital authoritarianism defined as "the use of digital information technology by authoritarian regimes to surveil, repress, and manipulate domestic and foreign populations."<sup>3</sup> This essay will examine the democratic retrenchment and increased digital authoritarianism of the last decade, tracing how democratic backsliding in Africa has accelerated since the pandemic began.

## A Global Pattern

As democracy scholars Stephen Haggard and Robert Kaufman recently observed, the recent democratic retrenchment is coming from elected officials, rather than coup d'états. It is elected leaders who are dismantling checks and balances, removing limits on executive power, curtailing civil liberties, and undermining the integrity of the electoral system<sup>4</sup>. This global pattern has multiple causes, including economic inequality, American imperial overreach, and increased migration, all of which have led to disillusionment with democratic systems, and have inspired a populist demand for Trump-style leaders who appear to be strong, decisive, and anti-system. This populist wave has also led to the personalization of political regimes, democratic and authoritarian, with power highly concentrated in the hands of a single individual, as seen in Turkey, Philippines, Poland, Russia and on the African continent as well<sup>5</sup>.

Freedom House's 2020 report noted that the global decline in democratic governance and respect for human rights—which started in 2006—accelerated in 2019. The report highlighted the anti-democratic turn in West Africa before the COVID-19 pandemic began, noting that this region was where five cases of the world's democratic decline had happened. Benin and Senegal went from 'free' to 'partly free', so that today Ghana and Cabo Verde

are the only 'free' states in West Africa<sup>6</sup>. This global decline accelerated during 2020, so that nowadays only a fifth of the world's globe lives in fully free countries. The report downgraded the freedom scores of 73 countries, not only authoritarian regimes such as China, Belarus, and Venezuela, but also established democracies such as India and the United States, because of the rise of liberal populist leaders. Last year, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation's Index of African Governance reported the first ever decline in African governance since it began issuing its assessments in 2007<sup>7</sup>.

In 2020, West Africa saw more democratic back-sliding. In Mali, disputed legislative elections, ongoing protests and strikes culminated in a coup d'état in August 2020. In Cameroon, thousands of young protestors mobilized in September 2000, demanding the resignation of the 88-year old tyrant President Paul Biya, who has ruled the country since 1980. The regime quashed the protests and arrested opposition leaders, ensuring that the 88-year old would run for a tenth term in 2024. In Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire, presidents Alpha Conde and Alassane Ouattara decided to run for third terms after tinkering with the Constitution. Macky Sall of Senegal and Patrice Talon of Benin have introduced similar constitutional amendments. Beyond West Africa: in Zambia, Edgar Lungu has been trying to amend the Constitution to extend his tenure, ahead of elections later this month. In Uganda, during the elections of January 2021, the authorities placed opposition candidate Bobi Wine under house arrest and shut down the internet ahead of voting, allowing the 76-year old Yoweri Museveni to win a sixth term in office. And, of course, protests are ongoing in Eswatini against a decrepit authoritarian regime.

## COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has been exploited by African regimes to crack down on opposition movements, promote disinformation, and surveil citizenry. Lockdowns have been violently enforced to ban political gatherings and electoral campaigning. In Ethiopia, Abiy's postponing of elections in 2020 due to COVID-19, exacerbated tensions with the TPLF and undermined the country's much-awaited process of democratic transition. In Tunisia and elsewhere, state elites used COVID-19 as a cover to deploy new surveillance technologies. As Freedom House reported, the public health situation "created an opening

for the digitization, collection and analysis of people's most intimate data without adequate protections against these abuses"<sup>8</sup>. As mentioned, a decade ago as protests spread from Tunisia to other countries, the conventional wisdom was that the internet was a liberation technology that could help bring down dictatorships. A decade later, cyber-optimism has given way to cyber-pessimism, as it has become evident that digital technologies are allowing for new styles of authoritarianism. As a report in *Foreign Policy* magazine on the Pegasus affair showed, African states have been very eager importers of the most advanced surveillance technologies<sup>9</sup>.

In response to the more sanguine claims that China's expansion could counter Western support for authoritarianism in Africa, it's worth examining how the Chinese model of surveillance is being exported to Africa. As scholar Xiao Chang recently wrote, understanding the Chinese model of digital authoritarianism "based on censorship propaganda and AI-driven population surveillance," can shed light on the emerging surveillance infrastructures of the Middle East and North Africa<sup>10</sup>. In the Arab world, the United Arab Emirates seems to be closely replicating the Chinese model, with comprehensive surveillance becoming "a societal norm, while highly sophisticated artificial intelligence assesses massive quantities of data to identify threats, trends and opportunities for state action"<sup>11</sup>. In Africa, the Chinese government has been promoting its 'Digital Silk Road,' which includes fiber optic cables, mobile networks, data centers, and smart cities built by Chinese technology companies. The Chinese tech company ZTE, for instance, is laying fiber optic cables and establishing networks, surveillance mapping, cloud storage, and data analysis services in cities across Ethiopia, Egypt, Nigeria, and Sudan<sup>12</sup>. A report from May 2021 showed that between 2006 and April 2021, Huawei closed 70 cloud infrastructure and e-government transactions with 41 governments or their state-owned enterprises<sup>13</sup>. The majority of these states are classified as 'non-free' (34%) or 'partially free' (43%), by Freedom House, and are concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa (36%) or Asia (20%). They are mostly low- and middle-income countries; in other words, these are less-developed countries, where there is strong demand, lower barriers to entry and less scrutiny. In contrast to China, Russia is exporting a different type of digital repression, selling technologies that focus mostly on disinformation campaigns that can affect election results. By some accounts, Russian

surveillance tech is currently more affordable for African countries than Chinese, Israeli, American, or European technologies<sup>14</sup>.

## Positive Trends

Despite this democratic retrenchment, there are positive developments worth highlighting. As Khabele Matlosa has demonstrated, five African countries held elections during the pandemic: Guinea, Mali, Benin, Burundi, and Malawi, with fairly high turnout in Burundi (87.7%), Malawi (64.8%) and Guinea (58.04%)<sup>15</sup>. (According to Afrobarometer, turnout was low in Benin and Mali—the latter due not only to the pandemic, but also to the insurgency in the north and inter-communal violence in the central region of the country). The elections in Malawi and Seychelles are among the positive scenarios of the past two years. Malawi held elections in May 2019, the results were contested by opposition parties, and subsequently overturned by the courts. Citizens went to the polls again in June 2020, despite efforts by president Peter Mutharika to postpone the voting because of COVID-19, and Lazarus Chakwera, leader of the opposition Malawi Congress Party, won convincingly and assumed the presidency. Likewise, in Seychelles, elections held in October 2020, saw the opposition leader Wavel Ramkalawan of the Linyon Demokratik Seselwa (LDS) opposition party ascend to the presidency. But other African states, including Liberia, Chad, Somalia, and Somaliland, have postponed democracy.

Despite the recent anti-democratic turn, broader trends give reason for optimism. Since 2011, youth-led protest movements—often aided by internet technologies and social media—in Africa have toppled geriatric leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and more recently in Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Sudan. Africa is the youngest and fastest growing continent, with an estimated 60% of the population under the age of 25 and a median age of around 20. In Asia and South America, the average age is 32, while in Europe and North America it is closer to 40. By some estimates, Africa's population may double by 2050 to approximately 2.5 billion people, meaning that one of every four people on the planet will live in Africa<sup>16</sup>. The political disenchantment and anti-system sentiment currently expressed by African youth is rooted in the failed top-down electoral experiments of the 1990s, and structural adjustment programs that

emacinated state services and debilitated health sectors (desperately needed then to address the AIDS pandemic and now the COVID-19 crisis). The market reforms debilitated the left-leaning parties that had dominated, so that nowadays it is either NGOs, or more likely ethnic movements and religious ‘trust networks’, that perform the organizational and welfare roles that party and state institutions played in the decades after independence. Western-backed austerity programs brought neither growth nor democracy<sup>17</sup>. As political scientist Zachariah Mampilly has observed, China may have emerged as Africa’s largest trading partner, but that hasn’t aided democratization; if anything, Africa’s aging autocrats have found new external backers in Russia, India, and the Gulf states<sup>18</sup>. This is why ongoing protest and mobilization is a positive trend.

Current backsliding notwithstanding, recent research has demonstrated that sustained bottom-up mobilization can produce deeper forms of democracy than top-down, elite electoral engineering. As the sociologists Mohamed Kadir, Adaner Usmani, and Benjamin Bradlow concluded from a survey of 108 democratic transitions that occurred between 1950 and 2010: “One of the most consistent and powerful explanations of substantive democratization is the length of unarmed pro-democratic mobilization prior to a transition”<sup>19</sup>. Africa’s steadfast youth-driven protest movements thus provide ample reason for optimism.

## Notes de fin

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Hisham Aidi focuses on cultural globalization and the political economy of race and social movements. He received his Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University and has taught at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), and at the Driskell Center for the Study of the African Diaspora at the University of Maryland, College Park. He is the author of *Redeploying the State* (Palgrave, 2008) a comparative study of neo-liberalism and labor movements in Latin America; and co-editor, with Manning Marable, of *Black Routes to Islam* (Palgrave, 2009).

In 2002–2003, Aidi was a consultant for UNDP's Human Development Report. From 2000 to 2003, he was part of Harvard University's *Encarta Africana* project, and worked as a cultural reporter, covering youth culture and immigration in Harlem and the Bronx, for *Africana*, *The New African* and *ColorLines*. More recently, his work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Foreign Affairs*, *The New Yorker* and *Salon*. Since 2007, he has been a contributing editor of *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Culture, Politics and Society*. Aidi is the author most recently of *Rebel Music: Race, Empire and the New Muslim Youth Culture* (Pantheon, 2014), a study of American cultural diplomacy. Aidi teaches the SIPA MIA survey course *Conceptual Foundations of International Politics* and seminars in SIPA's summer program.

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the author.



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