

MEASURING GOVERNANCE AND ASSESSING TRENDS IN DEMOCRACY DURING TIMES OF PANDEMIC

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Abstract: *Bringing to attention the main theoretical landmarks regarding the national governance is a necessity since there are heated debates on the role of the state in the management of phenomena that transcend its borders such as international migration and the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, the paper aims to carry out a non-exhaustive analysis, but focused on recent trends in the study of governance, correlating them with the latest events and determining phenomena that manifest themselves in the international security environment. The goal is to determine whether or not and to identify how the pandemic has influenced governance as a whole, the decline of democracy in particular, as well as national security, especially in the case of European states.*

Keywords: *governance, good governance, decline in democracy, illiberalism, COVID-19 pandemic, national security.*

The last decade has emphasized the challenge of good governance, both as a necessity and, correlated, as a principle and value. The contexts are varied: from the spread of liberal autocracies or so-called “illiberal democracies” to the crisis triggered by international migration or the COVID-19 pandemic. The development of these crises has shown that there is a need to strengthen governance as a key lever for sustainable development and systemic resilience. Internationally, for at least the last two years, the pandemic has highlighted the need for effective cooperation between states, but the issue of growing differences between forms of government has hampered the effective management of the crisis and has given rise to new tensions and to a real competition between countries. Overall, the pandemic has exacerbated several negative trends in the international security environment, including questioning the ability of multilateral institutions to manage the crisis, weakening governance, democratic backsliding, increasing US-China rivalry that faced Europe with a difficult strategic choice. Therefore, at least for the time being, it cannot be said that the COVID-19 pandemic was a catalyst for international cooperation, but, on the contrary, many countries have focused on the national level (see measures to restrict exports of materials considered vital for crisis management and the temporary closure of borders). At this level, too, governance has not been an easy task, with the pandemic causing a number of challenges through subsequent crises: from health to economic and social ones.

1. Governance and democracy. A theoretical framework

Governance is the framework set by the government to ensure the optimal functioning of the state, it is the way a government implements its policies to achieve the desired objectives. Instead, the government represents those forms of command and control characterized by the role of central public institutions, hierarchical relations, electoral responsibility, legal

instruments, and binding decisions applicable to all (*erga omnes*) (Bartolini 2011). In a classical approach, the role of the national government is to ensure that the demands and needs of citizens, voters, consumers and taxpayers are transferred and aggregated by the political system that generates a response through its policies, then implemented by the public administration (Bartolini 2011). Governance depends on the government, the latter promoting various types of policies, rules and regulations based on its form (democratic, autocratic, totalitarian, etc.).

At the national level, governance is defined as the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country's problems at all levels, and includes mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, fulfil their obligations and mediate disputes (COTRAIN and UNDP-Philippines 1997, 6). Moreover, the government faces a major challenge: to promote, support and sustain human development understood not only as economic development, but especially as a way to improve human skills (long life and health, knowledge, a decent standard of living) and creating the conditions for development (participation in political and community life, environmental sustainability, human security, rights, gender equality) (HDRO Outreach n.d.). The World Bank identifies the three main dimensions of government: the form of the political regime, the process by which authority is exercised in managing a country's economic and social resources for its development, and last but not least, the ability of governments to design, formulate and implement policies and to discharge functions (The World Bank 1994, xiv).

Francis Fukuyama defines governance by emphasizing the ability of a government to produce and enforce rules, to provide services, whether that government is democratic or not (Fukuyama 2013, 3). He emphasizes that, compared to the goals that governance must achieve, the quality of governance is something different, governance being about the performance of the agents in fulfilling the wishes of those who lead, not about the goals set by them (Fukuyama 2013, 4). Thus, referring to Woodrow Wilson's view of administration, Fukuyama states that government is an institution that can function better or worse, while governance is about execution or public administration, being opposed to politics. For example, "an authoritarian regime can be well governed, just as a democracy can be mal-administrated" (Fukuyama 2013, 4).

If the above elements characterize an ideal of governance, this process nevertheless includes both the good and the bad methods that a society uses to distribute power and manage public resources and problems (Blunt and Rondinelli 1997, 9). By introducing normative descriptors in the definition of this concept, two others appear: good governance and bad governance. The first was advanced in the late 1980s by the World Bank as including "predictable, open, and enlightened policymaking (that is, transparent processes); a bureaucracy imbued with a professional ethos; an executive arm of government accountable for its actions; and a strong civil society participating in public affairs; and all behaving under the rule of law" (The World Bank 1994, vii). UN has been identified key features of good governance: participatory, transparent, accountable, affective, equitable, and promoting rule of law (COTRAIN and UNDP-Philippines 1997, 6) (Quiles 2013).

In the same conceptual framework, bad governance is a consequence of corruption, which is defined as systematic and unpunished violation of the rules of an organization or institution by some members who, by virtue of having a certain authority, use the resources of the organization for purposes different of the formally established ones (Bulai 1998). It should be emphasized that it is not enough to discuss only political or economic-administrative corruption, but also moral and cultural corruption, material and symbolic ones. Expert studies show that, unfortunately, bad governance is more widespread in the world than good governance due to the fact that this phenomenon is encountered in any type of society, from totalitarian to democratic one, especially affecting the services of health and education, but also law enforcement (Rose and Peiffer 2019). Moreover, bad governance is not only associated

with the phenomenon of corruption, but also with policy makers who fail to achieve established goals, inefficiently spending large sums of money from public funds.

However, where does one type of government end and the other begin? What is the connection with democracy?

It is important to note that the most widely used governance indicators are based on the premise that there is a strong statistical correlation between the low level of corruption and the fulfilment of the criteria for achieving good governance. In addition, good governance and democracy, along with economic reforms, are seen as interrelated and mutually supportive aspects of the development process (Joseph 2001). There are also authors who argue that democratic institutions and democratically elected governments are key factors in achieving good governance (Stockemer 2009). Others argue that a democratic system hinders GDP growth, while countries with authoritarian political systems thrive faster than democracies because they are able to instil in the masses the spirit of hard work, sacrifice and obedience (Woo-Cumings (Ed.) 1999) (Chan 2002) (Gregor 1979) (Stockemer 2009, 242-43). Other authors consider the relationship between democracy and economic growth to be positive, the latter requiring legal limitations of arbitrary power, which gives individuals the opportunity to safely draw up plans for their economic future (Przeworski, et al. 2000) (Gerring, et al. 2005) (Mobarak 2005) (Sklar 1987) (Stockemer 2009, 242-43). Finally, another perspective starts from the premise that democracy does not have significant effects on economic growth, economic development depending on the existence of growth-oriented government policies and not on the type of the regime of the country (Alesina and Rodrik 1994) (Alesina, Özler, et al. 1996) (Stockemer 2009, 243).

In “Does Democracy Lead to Good Governance?”, Daniel Stockemer, professor of Political Science at the University of Ottawa (Canada), examines the main premises used in governance literature and concludes that while many studies link democracy to more effective public governance, they fail to clearly establish the relationship between the two concepts (Stockemer 2009, 244). This link is also neglected in the case of development studies: while acknowledging the need for democracy, they focus mainly on the relationship between good governance and economic, social and cultural development (Stockemer 2009). Stockemer refers to Mustapha K. Nabli and Charles Humphrey’s “Better Governance for Development in the Middle East and North Africa: Enhancing Inclusiveness and Accountability”, in which the authors state that the most important conditions for sustainable development and growth are: stability and efficiency of the government in the absence of corruption, the regulatory qualities of the state and the rule of law; at the same time, the lack of effective governance practices reduces the ability of governments to meet the challenges of a globalized world (Stockemer 2009, 244).

In a critical essay on good governance, Merilee S. Grindle, Professor Emeritus of International Development at Harvard, argues that this concept is rather obscure than clear, with so many positive features that it has led to an approach characterized by ambiguity on the role of governance in the development process (Grindle 2016, 1-2). The author states that, for example, two decades ago, the ideal qualities of governments were: effective, accountable, transparent and demonstrating rule of law. Currently, more than 14 conditions need to be identified: equity, participation, inclusiveness, democracy, large-scale service delivery, sound regulation, decentralization, open trade regime, respect for human rights, gender and racial equality, a good investment climate, sustainable use of energy, citizen security, job creation, etc. (Grindle 2016, 2). The link between good governance and development has become a *cliché*, so many analysts believe *a priori* that development requires good governance and good governance leads to development (Hermes, et al. 1999, 43), while the cause-effect relationship is not fully explained. In this regard, Grindle states that there are countries that, although

demonstrating conditions associated with good governance, have not reached a level of well-being, while in many developed and prosperous countries there may be serious governance problems. Thus, governance can improve or deteriorate itself unrelated to the development or well-being of that country (Hermes, et al. 1999). An example is the Ebola crisis in West African countries (2014-2016), in which the media stated that if a country had good governance, it would not have been affected by the epidemic - this statement is considered by Grindle to be erroneous, because it would have been necessary to assess how the country's health care system should have been improved, not the mere assertion of the existence or non-existence of good governance (Grindle 2016, 3). Although theorists continue to critically analyse the relationship between these concepts, the International Monetary Fund states that promoting good governance "in all its aspects, including by ensuring the rule of law, improving efficiency and accountability of the public sector, and tackling corruption" are key elements of the framework in which economies thrive (International Monetary Fund 1996).

The definition of good governance is, in most cases, focused on both the results and the process itself. In this regard, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) advances the notion of *governance for development* on the premise that societies with more efficient and responsible government institutions perform better on a range of issues, from economic growth to human development and social cohesion (OECD 2012). Governance thus becomes more than a means to development, but even an end in itself (especially in terms of good governance).

Another example is the definition developed by Michael Johnston: good governance consists of legitimate, accountable and effective ways of obtaining and using public power and resources in pursuit of widely accepted social goals, such as legitimate, efficient and responsive institutions and policies, comprehensible processes and results, transparency, incentives to sustain good governance, vertical and horizontal accountability (Johnston 2002, 2, 7-8). The same author also identifies a number of challenges to good governance: avoiding excessive legislation and regulations, giving due weight to policy, building a broad-based support for reform, paying more attention to incentives for leaders and citizens, assessing public opinion, strengthening checks and balances (both administrative, political and political), recognition of resistance to reform, regional approach to issues, and long-term focus (Johnston 2002, 8-14).

It is important to emphasize from this approach the attention paid to the elements of perception and representation: from politics, support for reform and public opinion, to resistance to change, to reform. Therefore, good governance is not just a set of technical desideratum, more or less tangible, but a multidimensional approach in which the citizen and society represent more than the object of governance, but even factors that influence this process.

2. The state and governance as sources of (in) security

Another issue that needs to be addressed is the relationship between government and national security.

According to Barry Buzan and the other representatives of the Copenhagen School, a particular problem can be presented as a threat by framing it either as a special type of policy or as something above politics (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998). Therefore it can be defined as a spectrum that varies from unpolitized issues, which the state has nothing to do with, to politicization, i.e. the introduction of that issue in public policies that require government decisions and the allocation of resources, and to securitization, in which case the issue is no longer debated as a political one, but it is approached at an accelerated pace and in ways that may violate legal norms and social rules (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998, 23-6). In this context, it is necessary to clarify the conditions under which governance issues have become

subject to securitization, how they are understood and assessed in terms of influencing security. Therefore, if securitization requires state actors to classify a certain issue as a security one, then the quality of government can also go beyond the scope of politicization and can be included on the security agenda.

Good governance is considered to be the foundation and one of the most important guarantees for national security and, in general, the literature emphasizes the strong correlation between government and national security, referring to the other related concepts: democracy and development (Killion 2014) (Okafor and Malizu 2014) (Hornby 1995) (Bevir and Hall 2011, 356). For example, democracy creates an environment conducive to development, and good governance is essential for sustained economic growth, so it can be said that democratic governance provides the means to reduce socio-economic divisions and tensions affecting the achievement of national security. In a non-democratic system where fundamental freedoms and human rights are not respected, the rule of law is not functioning and participation in governance, justice and fairness is not guaranteed, the national security cannot be achieved. Thus, it is identified a synergistic relationship between national security and democracy (Hornby 1995).

In the event of a pandemic, states are forced to take measures that affect a significant part of the population, causing dissatisfaction, and being subjectively represented as evidence of bad governance or even a decline in democracy, regardless of the values of the indices and indicators presented in the previous section. Moreover, beyond the opinion of population, the COVID-19 pandemic proves that some key-functions of governance can conflict with each other. This is the case for the function of protecting civil liberties and the one of providing public goods to population: free movement and free association are restricted in favour of public health (Alsan, et al. 2020).

Developments in recent years are edifying evidence of Barry Buzan's assertion that "level 2 entities (i.e. the state) act as a source of both threats to and security for individuals, while individuals provide much of the reason for, and some of the limits to, the security-seeking activities of collective units" (Buzan 1983, 18). This statement might be illustrated by two cases that are linked to some of the most important and topical challenges for the European countries: the decline in democracy and the measures taken to manage the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this case, the decline in democracy can be understood in two ways. First of all, the democratic backsliding might be perceived as such by the citizens who are not satisfied with the measures taken by their own government in managing a specific event, such as the pandemic crisis. Second, it can be explained as a decline derived from the direct action of the government in relation with the democratic norms and values. In Buzan's terms, the first case is about the threats arising from domestic law-making and enforcement, but not in the way he explained it ("as a result of inadequate or excessive policing and prosecution practices") (Buzan 1983, 24-5), but as a perverse effect of well-intended legislation that causes dissatisfaction by applying it. The second possible interpretation on decline in democracy brings into forefront the other three general categories of threats emanated directly or not from the state, synthesized by Buzan as: "those arising from direct political action by the state against individuals or groups; those arising from struggles over control of the state machinery; and those arising from the state's external security policies" (Buzan 1983, 25).

The first perspective on decline in democracy links citizens' opinions on the assessed role and efficiency of crisis management measures with the satisfaction with these measures. The Eurobarometer survey shows that a large part of European citizens, around a quarter, felt that restriction measures were not justified (Kantar 2021, 16), and almost half of the Europeans are not satisfied with the measures taken by their national government to fight the COVID-19 pandemic (Kantar 2021, 12).

The second perspective can be analysed focusing on the objective comparison of the crisis management measures with the national and international legislation and democratic values. Beside restrictions on freedom of movement and gathering, still justified by the crisis situation, another example is the case of export restrictions for COVID-19 related drugs and medical supplies: between January and October 2020, 85 jurisdictions around the world enforced such export restrictions despite international calls for cooperation and mutual assistance (The Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, Global Trade Alert, and The World Bank Group 2020).

If the first perspective has a preponderant subjective component, the second way of understanding the decline in democracy involves measurements by specific indices that also include objective indicators.

Conclusions

From the theoretical framework presented above, some conclusions can be drawn regarding the relationship between government, democracy and national security during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as how they may evolve. First of all, the relationship between democracy and the quality of governance is not exclusively one-to-one, although, if we look at current Western standards, liberal democracy is the form of government and the political ideology with the best results in terms of economic and social development. Although there is a connection between good governance and development, it involves nuances and a clear definition of terms (good governance, governance for development, development). Governance is, however, a constantly evolving concept, as evidenced by the evolution of both measurement methods (an increasing number of indicators and a multidimensional approach) and its forms of manifestation (e.g., the concept of new governance or global governance). Moreover, the assessment/measurement of the quality of governance must include an objective dimension (basic indicators, mainly of economic and political nature), and also a subjective one (contextual indicators, incorporating previous indicators in socio-cultural contexts: from corruption to of public opinion). Furthermore, security analysis should include a dimension of governance quality analysis, given the strong correlation between governance and democracy.

All these assertions adapt the analysis of governance and security to the current complex and paradoxical context in which, during crises, governments can implement management measures that, on the one hand, will be perceived by citizens as sources of insecurity and anti-democratic measures, and on the other hand, they will come into conflict with each other because, in an attempt to provide public goods to all, governments will be forced to restrict some fundamental rights and freedoms.

It is clear that a pandemic, through the management measures it imposes, can affect both the psychosocial representation of governance and democracy, and their quality. This paper focuses on a number of issues that may or may not contribute to both the decline of democracy and the rise in insecurity. Identifying and studying the indices and indicators for measuring governance and democracy, the sources and causes of insecurity can help to develop policies and implement measures to prevent triggering serial crises.

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