

The coincidence was almost poetic. The Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) 2019 Democracy Index was released in January, and once again confirmed Asia's lack of any mature democracy.

At the same time, the coronavirus spreading through the region highlighted the inadequacy of Asian governance for managing such pandemics. The region needs to graduate beyond its dirty dictators, greedy generals and dodgy democrats if it is to realise an Asian Century and confront its many challenges.

The EIU Index has a broad-based conception of democracy. Thankfully it goes beyond narrow conceptions of electoral democracy in a world where there are all too many shonky elections. Other factors are taken into account, notably the functioning of government, political participation, political culture and civil liberties.

And the quality of democracy is also considered as 167 countries are classified as either full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes or authoritarian regimes.

As the world's disreputable leaders like Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump and Boris Johnson delight in castigating Europe, it is noteworthy that European countries dominate the full democracy category and its 22 places. Others in this top group include New Zealand, Canada and Australia.

For a number of years now, the US has been judged a flawed democracy, and not one Asian country made it into the full democracy group.

Asia is most notable for its array of unsavoury authoritarian regimes like China, North Korea, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar, as well as the hybrid regimes of Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh.

Naive apologists for authoritarian regimes, of which there are many in the West, are wont to admire authoritarianism, for its capacity to get things done. For example, China is building two hospitals in less than two weeks to combat the coronavirus — something that is unthinkable in a Western country.

But authoritarian regimes like China also live on tenterhooks. They are nervous dictatorships which fear for their future. That's why they survive through repression,

propaganda and censorship.

And that's why when something like coronavirus occurs, they instinctively cover up and play down what's happening, and silence those who know, as China did for at least a month (the first evidence of the virus was in early December). Controlling information is essential for social and political stability, meaning the Communist Party's monopoly on power.

It thus tries to protect the myth of omnipotence. But its omnipotence is vacuous, as evidenced by the continued existence of illegal wildlife markets, from where the virus is thought to have emerged.

The Chinese government's reaction only makes matters very much worse and causes more deaths. Also in Xi Jinping's China, the emperor controls and decides everything. This means that local authorities had to wait for approval to be transparent and to act, adding further delays and deaths.

China's top leadership, the Politburo Standing Committee, has just recently admitted "*shortcomings and deficiencies*" in the country's response to the deadly coronavirus outbreak, and called for an improvement in China's emergency management system. Let's hope that it happens. Because, while a lot has changed since China's SARS outbreak 17 years ago, most regrettably some things haven't, especially when it comes to transparency and honesty.

One thing that has changed is that as China has grown in international power, world leaders and international organisations now kowtow to the communist giant — they buckle to its attractive money and market, and intimidating military. It is thus hardly surprising that the World Health Organisation (WHO) should drag its feet before finally declaring the coronavirus a Global Health Emergency. The WHO does not like to embarrass the new global power, especially as it provides lots of money to the organisation.

But the worst kowtow of all is the international community's acceptance of China's veto on Taiwan's participation in the WHO. Taiwan is lumped together as part of China, even though it is manifestly separate for all intents and purposes. It thus cannot contribute to or benefit from critical WHO work in a timely manner. And Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie is reluctant to respond to pressure from her public and medical community to close all the territory's border crossings with China, which could limit the spread of the virus, for fear of offending her tetchy bosses in Beijing. In other words, many are complicit in the mismanagement of the coronavirus pandemic.

Beyond authoritarianism, Asia's flawed democracies, of which there are many like Indonesia, India, the Philippines, Mongolia, Thailand and Sri Lanka, are also ill-equipped to respond to pandemics like the coronavirus. They are fragile states with a weak capacity or weak state legitimacy leaving their citizens vulnerable to a range of shocks like the coronavirus.

India is a particular case with its simply appalling public health system, which leaves it extremely ill-equipped to respond to the coronavirus pandemic. India's public spending on health care is only 1 1/2 of GDP, while the OECD average is over 6% — and India's GDP per capita is merely 17% of the OECD average. As the OECD notes:

“The number of doctors and nurses is low, especially in rural areas. Public primary care centres have suffered from a shortage of adequately trained and motivated personnel with relatively low compensation packages.”

In a similar vein, Australian medical experts are concerned about Indonesia's ability to detect coronavirus, potentially leaving a number of undiagnosed cases on Australia's doorstep. Indeed:

“The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age can reveal that Indonesian medical laboratories lack the testing kits needed to rapidly detect the Wuhan coronavirus, according to one of the country's leading molecular biologists, and the virus may already be present in the country despite government claims of no infections.”

This is indeed worrying as some 2 million Chinese nationals visited Indonesia in 2018.

The safest place to be in Asia at the time of the coronavirus maybe Singapore and Japan. These countries may not be models of democracy, but they have strong and competent states, which have the capacity to respond to the coronavirus.

But these countries are also playgrounds for Chinese tourists who may have the coronavirus with them. True, they are closing their borders to visitors from China. But after all of China's procrastination, it may be too late to prevent casualties.

The Chinese New Year is usually a cause for celebration. But this year is starting badly!

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