Much American ink is being spilt over the fact that Russian voters recently agreed to allow President Vladimir Putin to potentially serve for another sixteen years. This is part of a liberal campaign against authoritarian leaders that pays scant attention to reality: while ‘democratic’ rulers are constantly negotiating with their people’s representatives, evil authoritarians are implementing their decisions. If you think about it, the crucial question is not whether a ruler is ‘elected’, but whether he can be successfully challenged. Peter the Great brought the Boyars (the Russian equivalent of America’s Senators) to heel, imposing fundamental changes to every aspect of Russian life, including the ‘opening to the West’ for which he is remembered abroad, and changing the way Russians dressed.

President Donald Trump is nowhere near being able to rule with a free hand, however, he is ridding the country of what he calls ‘the swamp’, rolling back necessary rules and regulations rather than preventing Congress’s pet projects from getting in the way of ‘making America great again’ (even though this would have to start with eliminating the Corona virus). The governments of European countries are not dependent on Brussels for basic necessities, while the politically independent American states depend on Washington for crucial funds, resulting in an overall inability to, as the mantra goes, ‘get things done’.

While the American President tells Americans to ‘live with the Corona virus’ until it ‘magically goes away’, ordering governors not to make mask wearing obligatory, countries in both Europe and Asia are bringing the pandemic at
least partially under control. This suggests not only that more centralized/authoritarian governments are better able to meet crises, but also, that ‘exceptionalism’ can refer to failure. Europe’s democratic socialist regimes have remained in power for decades, whether under center right or center-left governments. In France, where I spent thirty years during two different periods, actions are taken by the Prime Minister chosen by the President, and the cabinet he in turn creates. When taking office, as is currently happening, he presents his program to the parliament, requesting a ‘vote of confidence’. When parliament refuses to cooperate with actions being taken by the Prime Minister on something the President considers vital, he can invoke a law known as 49.3 that allows him to force passage of a bill without a vote (unless the parliament votes a motion of no confidence). While under the American system of ‘checks and balances’, it is proving nearly impossible to rid the country of a terrible president who, in Steve Bannon’s words, is ‘dismantling the state’, without slogans, Europe’s parliamentary systems keep power on a relatively short leash. This is all the more meaningful that in crises such as Covid, the President or Prime Minister can order industries to produce masks or other indispensable items, and to order social security to pay workers forced into unemployment 84% of their salaries instead of the usual 75%.

European parliamentary systems also allow for the occasional authoritarian. Take France’s Charles de Gaulle, for example. An obscure Colonel at the start of World War II, his command of English enabled him to set up a provisional government based in London, prolonging his rule for another two years “in order to re-establish democracy” in formerly Vichy France. Ten years later, as France’s colonies fought for independence, he came out of retirement to create the entirely new, presidential Fifth Republic, leading it from 1958 until a year before his death in 1969, as the left gnashed its (few) teeth. While the Presidents and Prime Ministers that followed him ended in the trash bin of history, he is admired across the globe as it struggles to flatten the Covid death curve.

The most threatening epidemic since the 1918 flu that killed more than 50 million worldwide, Covid starkly illustrates the superiority of centralized government. Recently, the Guardian noted that for decades, in the face of uninterrupted US sanctions, revolutionary Cuba has sent doctors and other health workers to Indonesia, Pakistan, Haiti, West Africa, and recently, to the rescue of Europe’s social democratic health systems brought up short by Covid. The British daily also points out that not all Cuban health workers are happy with the obligation to repay their government for the free training they received from nursery to medical school, however, as usual when it comes to Cuba, the condemnation of ‘democrats’ goes hand in hand with ignorance:

Cuba’s communist rulers have been sending medical teams overseas for decades in a bid to save lives and influence people.

Paul Hare, a former British ambassador to Havana, said Fidel Castro launched the “doctor diplomacy” policy soon after his 1959 takeover as a means of using the island’s highly trained professionals to export revolutionary ideas and make new friends.

While some missions are provided free of charge, other countries pay Cuba for the medical services, bringing in $6.3bn (£4.8bn) annually and making it Havana’s largest source of foreign currency.

It’s true that Cuba has been exporting revolution and making friends around the world, in true socialist tradition, however the claim that when Fidel took power in 1959, Cuban doctors were eager to work in other third world countries is cringingly wrong. There were more than enough of them to serve the well-off, and most would soon flee to more lucrative locations. While teaching many Cubans to read, the socialist government trained engineers, agricultural specialists and medical professionals in record time, (including thousands of doctors and nurses from developing countries and the US) tuition free.

Inevitably, under the influence of ‘democratic’ ideas wafting across the Caribbean, some of those who benefit from the system resent having to reimburse it by serving abroad for a number of years, as I learned when revisiting the island in 2011. But it’s not as though they didn’t know what they were committing to, anymore than American students who take out high interest loans in order to acquire one of the most lucrative professions. The policy of all socialist countries is that free training creates an implicit IOU with the government, while the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo describes noblesse oblige in these terms:

Cuban doctors and nurses are being abused and exploited in order to fill the coffers of an authoritarian regime. “The Cuban ‘medical missions’ are exploitation: a for-profit front used to fund the regime’s repression and sow political discord.
Predictably, the Guardian chimed in: “Of course there are big human rights problems in Cuba – as there have been since the start of the revolution,” failing to point out that an American who enlists in the armed forces to kill innocent civilians abroad is a patriot, while a Cuban doctor who agrees to serve foreign patients is a victim.

As I wrote at the beginning of this article, the never mentioned difference between authoritarianism and ‘democracy’ (‘rule by the people’, also known as popular ‘consent’), is that authoritarian rulers are able to implement history-changing policies without domestic battles. Every leader who has gone down in history, including France’s Sun King, Russia’s Peter the Great, George Washington, FDR, Indira Ghandi and Vladimir Putin, has come to power determined to bring sweeping change to his/her country. In my memoir “Lunch with Fellini, Dinner with Fidel”, in 1963 I discovered that both Fidel Castro and the Italian film maker Federico Fellini, whom I had followed for a year, ‘ate, drank and slept’ their respective passions 24/7. (I was not surprised when Cuba’s then President Osvaldo Dorticos, told me that he considered Fidel to be ‘an artist’.)

Currently, for all the indignation over ‘Russian interference’, American elections play a relatively minor role, as politicians challenge national policies or delay their implementation to gain electoral points from their local voters, hindering efforts to deal with Covid 19. Meanwhile, Hong Kong covers the cleaning costs for its schools; South Korea helps them create day care centers open til evening; Germany subsidizes laptops so low-income students can participate in remote learning; Italy gives schools money for more teachers, masks and separations. And in Africa, Kenya’s Zoonotic Disease Unit brings human and animal health experts together with environmental specialists, since their interface is where pandemics occur.

If the outgoing hegemon would work with Xi Jin Ping and Vladimir Putin, they could not only prevent nuclear war, but craft common policies toward pandemics, of which there are certain to be more. The fact that Covid has been found to be airborne suggests that technology could play an important role in its elimination, similar to our ability to seed clouds. Has not the Russian President been shown on video passing through a short decontamination corridor, as pharmaceutical companies around the world compete to produce the best vaccine?

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