As many state of emergency declarations during the first wave of the pandemic as in the preceding decade

22 June 2021

Approximately half of the world's countries declared some form of state of emergency for brief or extended periods.

"The total number of states of emergency in the first half of 2020 is comparable to the total number of states of emergency declared between 2010 and 2019, so it is a big number. The areas that stand out are Latin America, Southern Europe and parts of Africa, which had a particularly large share of these states of emergency," says Magnus Lundgren, senior lecturer in political science.

Together with his research colleagues at Stockholm University, he has studied which factors made it more or less likely for a country to declare a state of emergency during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results are based on a statistical survey of 180 countries in the period from January to June 2020.

"We identified three main patterns relating to the influence of neighboring countries, the degree of democracy and pandemic preparedness."

Firstly, it was more likely for countries to declare a state of emergency if other countries in the same region had already done so. Secondly, states of emergency were more common among countries with weak democratic systems, compared with countries with strong democratic systems and countries with non-democratic systems. Finally, countries with stronger pandemic preparedness were less prone to declaring a state of emergency.

Might have been abused

The pandemic has put considerable pressure on society and governments have opted for various measures. A state of emergency can provide governments with greater opportunities to fight a
pandemic, however, they often lead to significant curtailment of civil liberties.

"Our research can help us to understand how different countries have tried to stop the pandemic. Although not the subject of direct analysis in our study, the results can potentially help us understand whether and to what extent a state of emergency has been abused by governments to promote political goals that have nothing to do with the pandemic," says Mark Klamberg, professor of international law at Stockholm University.


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