

REACTION

[COVID-19 could dramatically change the way we see government](#)

BY [NAYEF AL-RODHAN](#) |  [SUSTAINHISTORY](#) / 27 MARCH 2020



Facundo Arrizabalaga/EPA/Bloomberg via Getty Images

As countries around the world go into lockdown, the coronavirus' impact on governmental behaviour in liberal democracies has been unprecedented. From curfews to the closure of public spaces, the kinds of measures long associated with conflict and war are now being instituted in peace time in order to ensure the safety of citizens. Many are unused to seeing their government act in this way, and some citizens have struggled to adapt to new limits to the freedom of movement.

Precisely how governments act in the coming weeks and months will not just have an impact on how people survive the crisis, but also how they view government for years to come. In times of crisis, governments are forced to act in ways that would never be seen as acceptable during ordinary circumstances, and the public in turn come to view their government in a new light.

In the UK, this most famously took place during the Second World War, when the state took over much of public life, leading to a change in the way the public viewed government ultimately leading to the creation of large state institutions such as the National Health Service, whose indispensability remains undisputed by all major political parties up to this day.

The long-term impact of today's government policy can't yet be known for sure, but we can already discern where significant changes are likely to reside.

Despite world leaders' internationalist language of solidarity, many countries have necessarily had to shut their borders to prevent the virus from spreading. Travel bans and restricted movement will show the public what limitations to the freedom of travel look like in practice. Following the UK's lockdown announcement on Monday evening, The Daily Telegraph ran a headline proclaiming "The End of

Freedom". While this is perhaps hyperbolic, it might not be too much to say that we're witnessing the end of freedom as we know it.

As the virus makes the freedom of movement become synonymous with danger, chaos and unaccountability, and border checks and location tracking analogous to safety, it is likely that our wider political discourse will absorb these associations and adopt them as default thinking.

The virus has also put international organisations like the EU under strain. The Commission has closed the Schengen area to outsiders for the first time, and this nominally Europe-wide decision belies a great deal of friction between member states. While this measure looks to combat the virus across many different countries, the EU is also being forced to navigate a variety of governmental approaches

Where some European governments are in lockdown, such as Italy, others such as the Netherlands are only partially locking down and seeking to manage the virus through "herd immunity". This will no doubt test the EU's unity, particularly when coupled with the need to operate across vastly different population sizes, and quality of healthcare systems.

Ultimately, the crisis could strengthen international institutions by showing the value of a common goal, but it could also weaken them by accentuating member states' primary allegiances. This is especially so when it comes to formulating preventative measures for the future – different countries will demand different degrees of stringency according to how badly they were affected.

More broadly, this is not simply a question of what new measures governments will take, but also how successful they are in managing people's emotions. Human beings are fundamentally emotional and amoral creatures – they are driven by self-interest. When they come under threat, behaviour that runs parallel to society's broader interests too often breaks down in individuals.

This has a longstanding neurochemical foundation and is heightened in times of crisis – from reports of people fighting in supermarkets, to stories of people buying-up hand sanitiser in bulk and then selling it at raised prices.

And even at this early stage of the Coronavirus pandemic people are panicking. People are already exhibiting what I term "fear-induced pre-emptive aggression" which, if left unchecked, could cause significant disruption.

If governments are to address this change in behaviour it is vital that they do not become myopically focused on simply reducing infections and protecting the economy. Preserving human dignity and justice during a time of fear, desperation, and vulnerability, will be key for governments looking to maintain trust and stability.

With many people in isolation, cut-off from their work, and their loved ones, they will need to be supported and protected by their governments. This may require new measures, but it is also key that existing institutions and codes of behaviour remain in place, to guarantee that human dignity is not abandoned to secure a level of constancy.

As people come to crave and indeed become somewhat addicted to more frequent information updates, we can expect to see more engagement with government-citizen communication.

The British Prime Minister's address to the nation on Monday was watched live by more than 27m viewers, the largest figures in the UK's television history. And at a press conference this week journalists pitched questions to Health Secretary Matt Hancock via video links from their living rooms instead of crowding into a press conference.

This begs the question – surely the technological ability to do this means that it can be done more frequently. Both the media and the public will demand and come to expect this. Soon citizens will want to ask the questions in place of the journalists. The age of interactive government has just moved much closer towards us.

The world is likely to respond to this crisis in a number of ways. Just as after terrorist incidents governments altered the way national security functioned, it is likely that new rules, and new forms of behaviour will need to be developed, not just while the crisis is ongoing, but once it is over. The virus is likely to have a [major impact](#) on what we do, and there will be no turning back.

What the world looks like after this crisis is over is down to the governments of today. In crisis points, governments are capable of extraordinary things and set precedents for the future. However, if they neglect human rights, or fail to communicate as frequently and effectively as they should, or abandon longstanding fiscal rules, these precedents might easily carry over into the post-crisis world.

Governments therefore need to think carefully about how they act, because everything they do today doesn't just have an impact on the virus but on the very nature of government itself.

[Professor Nayef Al-Rodhan](#) (@SustainHistory) is a neuroscientist, philosopher and geostrategist. He is an Honorary Fellow at St Antony's College, University of Oxford, and Senior Fellow and Head of the Geopolitics and Global Futures Programme at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy in Switzerland.