

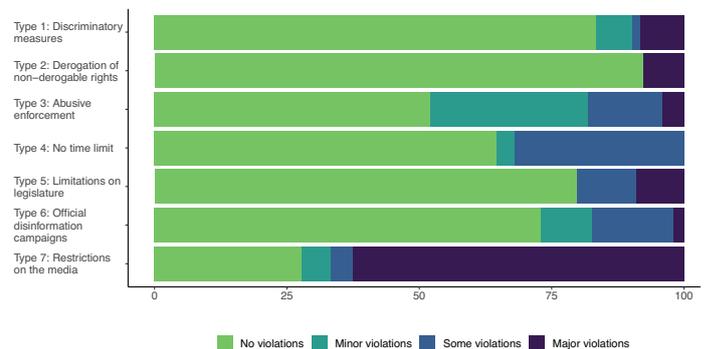
Pandemic Backsliding: Democracy Nine Months into the Covid-19 Pandemic

- As another wave of Covid-19 tests the healthcare systems in many countries, renewed government responses to the pandemic appear to be more in line with democratic standards for emergency measures than those taken during the first wave of the pandemic.
- Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Gothenburg-based V-Dem Institute has [tracked](#) violations of democratic standards in relation to Covid-19 measures in 144 countries.
- The latest update in mid-December 2020 shows somewhat encouraging developments. The situation has improved over the last three months for more than a quarter of the countries (26) that had engaged in at least some violations of democratic standards at the beginning of the pandemic. This is a continuation of the positive trend we reported in the third quarter.
- In the fourth quarter of 2020, some or major violations of democratic standards persisted in 69 countries, most of which were already autocratic before the pandemic.

Government responses to Covid-19 vary in the degree to which they respect democratic standards for emergency measures. For the fifth data update of the Pandemic Backsliding Project,² we have continued to introduce improvements in data quality and our approach to measuring violations of democratic standards during the Covid-19 pandemic.³ The data can be accessed from an [online dashboard](#).⁴

Based on the [International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#)⁵ and [practice-based theories](#),⁶ we classify seven types of violations of democratic standards as either *illiberal practices* that violate human rights (discriminatory measures, derogation of non-derogable rights or abusive enforcement) or *authoritarian practices* that sabotage accountability by limiting access to information and disabling voice (no time limit of the measures, limitations on the legislature, official disinformation campaigns). Further, a seventh type of violation – restrictions on the media – acts as both an illiberal and authoritarian practice because it simultaneously infringes human rights and undermines accountability.⁷ As Figure 1 shows, restrictions on the media are by far the most frequently observed violation in our data from March to December 2020.

FIGURE 1. SHARE OF COUNTRIES WITH VIOLATIONS OF DEMOCRATIC STANDARDS (MARCH TO DECEMBER 2020).



The Pandemic Violations of Democratic Standards Index (PanDem) captures the extent to which these violations have occurred since March 2020 and their severity. The PanDem index ranges from zero to one, with higher values indicating more severe violations of democratic standards. Figure 2 shows how countries scored on the PanDem Index between March and December 2020.⁸

¹ We would like to thank Ana Flavia Good God, Martin Lundstedt, Natalia Natsika, Abdalhadi Aljila, Tiago Fernandes, Staffan I. Lindberg, Seraphine F. Maerz, Hans Tung, Matthew Wilson and Nina Ilchenko as well as V-Dem country managers for their invaluable support and input. This research was financially supported by the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

² The Pandemic Backsliding Project bases its coding primarily on data collected by a team of trained research assistants. The sources are documented at <http://www.github.com/vdem/institute/pandem> and mainly include official government sources, academic databases, trusted inter-governmental, state or independent organizations, and trusted media outlets. In general, one coder was assigned to one country, but for some observations two coders provided input and the principal investigators reconciled the information in cases of disagreement. Country experts, regional experts, or the authors of this brief have reviewed the main data records. Our data includes all independent countries with more than 2 million inhabitants, excluding Libya, Palestine/West Bank, Syria, and Yemen.

³ For an overview of the changes between v4 and v5 of the data, see page 6 in our codebook available here: <https://github.com/vdem/institute/pandem/tree/master/codebook>. V5 coding includes information up to early December.

⁴ <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/PanDem/>

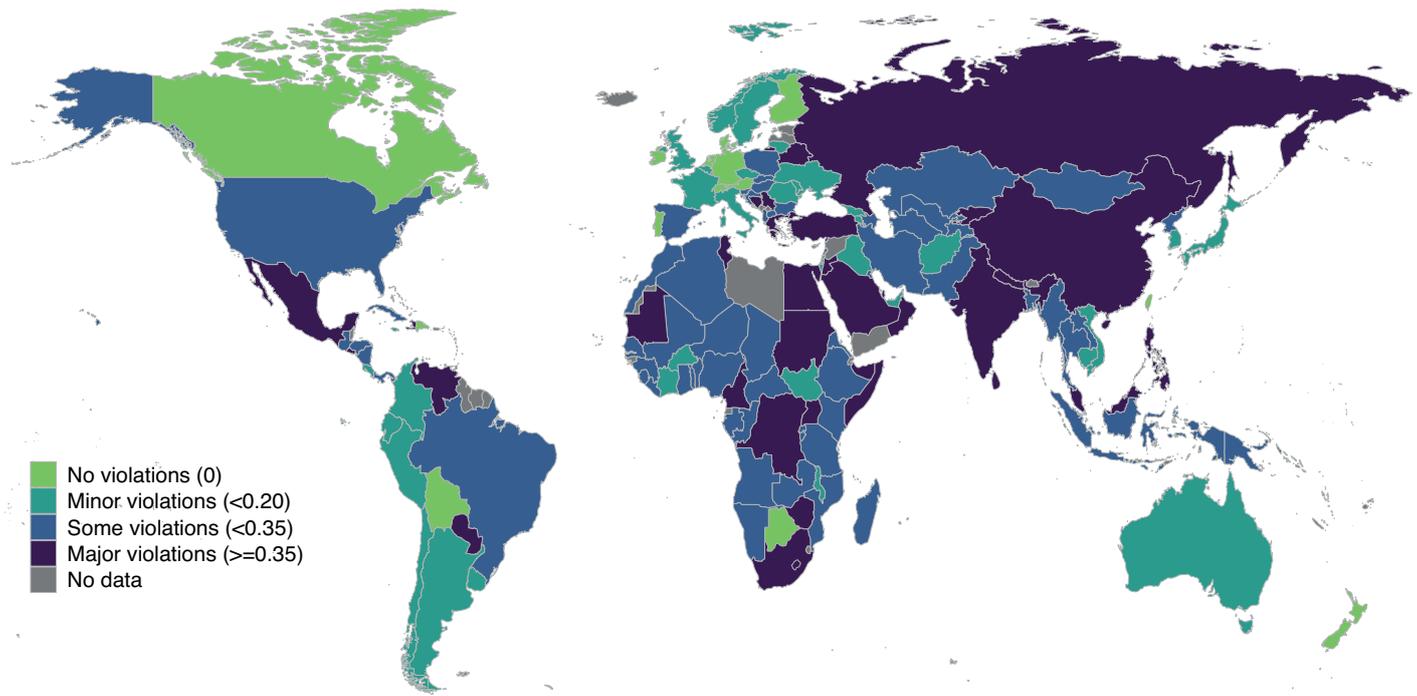
⁵ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/ccpr.pdf>

⁶ <https://academic.oup.com/ia/article/94/3/515/4992409>

⁷ For further information on the conceptual ideas, see Maerz et al (2020).

⁸ For each of the seven types, countries scored between 0 (no violations) and 3 (severe violations) points. We then added the scores and rescaled the index on a 0 to 1 range. For more details see our codebook: <https://github.com/vdem/institute/pandem/tree/master/codebook>

FIGURE 2. PANDEMIC VIOLATIONS OF DEMOCRATIC STANDARDS INDEX (MARCH TO DECEMBER 2020).



Note: Lower scores indicate fewer recorded violations of democratic standards by emergency measures. This map reflects the worst violations between March and December.

The new data provide a time series in three panels for each round of the data collected: the first round covers the time period from 11 March 2020⁹ to the end of June; the second round covers the third quarter of 2020 from July-September; and the third round covers the fourth quarter of 2020 from October until early December. To provide a general overview of the situation throughout the pandemic (so far), we also provide scores for the full period from March to December.¹⁰ Furthermore, we explore regional variation in the violations of democratic standards in the second part of this policy brief.

Pandemic Violations of Democratic Standards from March to December 2020

Around 55% of all democracies and 34% of the countries coded have committed no or only minor violations of democratic standards in their response to Covid-19. We did not record any violations (bright green) in 14 countries, 13 of which are democracies such as Botswana and Taiwan. In another 35 countries (dark green), we noted only minor violations, such as a few isolated instances of limited access to information.

However, in 95 other countries (66%) we note worrying developments. The 63 countries marked in dark blue exhibit some violations. The majority of them (43) were already autocratic at the end of 2019, but 20 were democracies. Of particular concern are 32 countries (dark purple), out of which 22 are autocracies and 10 are democracies. These countries engaged in

major violations, scoring more than 35% of the possible points on the PanDem Index in March-December.

While we note substantial improvement compared to the beginning of the pandemic, the situation has not changed much from the third to the fourth quarter (Figure 3). The majority of countries (85%) remain in the same violations category in October-December as they were in July-September. In the fourth quarter of 2020, we note 69 countries with some or major violations of democratic standards, which is almost the same number as in the third quarter (70 countries). Most of the countries with some or major violations in the fourth quarter were fully autocratic (51 countries or 74%) before the pandemic but 18 countries (26%) are democracies.

In most countries with some or major violations of democratic standards in the fourth quarter, problematic policies have been ongoing since the March-June period, such as discrimination against refugees in [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#) and [Greece](#), official disinformation in [Brazil](#), and limitations on the media in [Poland](#) and [Turkey](#).¹¹ Compared to the third quarter, several countries introduced new measures that violate democratic standards. For example, [Hungary](#) declared a second state of emergency in November, allowing the executive to rule by decree on a broad range of issues, which may exceed Covid-19-related measures.¹² The situation is exacerbated by violations that have been ongoing since March, such as new [legislation](#) that criminalizes fake news and limitations on [access to information](#).¹³

9 The date when the WHO announced Covid-19 a pandemic:

<https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-Covid-19/news/news/2020/3/who-announces-Covid-19-outbreak-a-pandemic>

10 The values for each panel represent the maximum observed violations during the time period.

11 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/08/bosnia-and-herzegovina-reckless-restrictions-of-movement-leave-refugees-and-migrants-stranded-without-protection/>
<https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR0125112020ENGLISH.PDF>

<https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/10/another-piece-populist-propaganda-critics-slam-brazilian-government-s-new-Covid-19-drug>

<https://ipi.media/report-media-freedom-in-europe-in-the-shadow-of-Covid-19/>; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2020/06/turkey-stifling-free-expression-during-the-Covid19-pandemic/>

12 https://njt.hu/translated/doc/J2020T0109P_20201111_FIN.pdf; <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=a1100128.tv#lj117id3a14>

13 <https://ipi.media/hungary-press-freedom-threatened-as-orban-handed-new-powers/>; <https://ipi.media/Covid-19-pandemic-adds-to-hungarys-transparency-woes/>

Pandemic Backsliding from October to December

The **Pandemic Backsliding Index (PanBack)** captures the risk of democratic erosion for a country during the Covid-19 pandemic.¹⁹ The PanBack Index gives greater weight to violations occurring in countries classified as electoral autocracies or electoral democracies – a “grey zone” known to have the highest probability of adverse regime change.²⁰

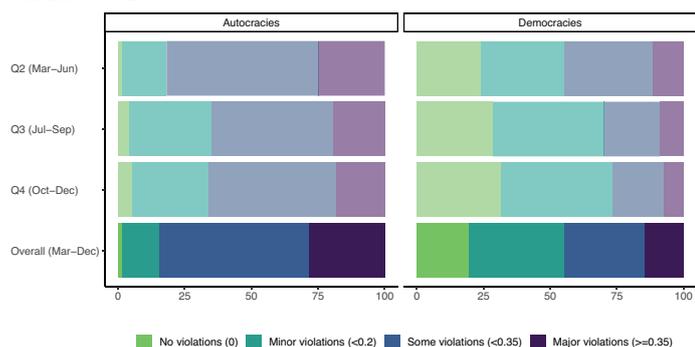
Table 1 provides a list of cases that score particularly highly (≥ 0.3) on the PanBack Index between October and December. In Sri Lanka, **discrimination** against Muslim burial practices is ongoing and **media restrictions** have forced some journalists to leave the country.²¹ Nevertheless, we note a slight improvement compared to the July–September period (from 0.65 to 0.5) as the **parliament** resumed its functions following its dissolution from 2 March until 5 August.²² Although official disinformation has decreased in **Uganda** in the October–December period, many violations, such as **arbitrary detention** of LGBT+ people and physical attacks on **journalists** are still ongoing.²³ Moreover, **new rules** require authorization for publishing information online, severely limiting access to information in Uganda.²⁴ The PanBack index has remained unchanged for **El Salvador**, where the authorities have engaged in excessive force to execute emergency measures.²⁵

Malaysia has not changed on the PanBack Index due to discrimination against **migrants** and restrictions on the **media** that have been ongoing since the March–June period.²⁶ Furthermore, emergency laws in **Malaysia** are vaguely formulated, which enables the executive to rule by decree on many matters, which may exceed Covid-19 related issues.²⁷ Although these seven countries remain at a high risk of pandemic backsliding, we note a decrease in the number of countries that scored highly on the PanBack Index. Eight countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, India, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Paraguay, Serbia, South Africa, Tunisia) were at a high risk of pandemic backsliding in the second or third quarter, but scored below 0.3 on the PanBack Index in the fourth quarter.

Nine months into the pandemic, 43 countries still have emergency measures without a time limit, including **Albania**, **Mexico**, and **The Gambia**.¹⁴ Other countries – including **Brazil**, **Jamaica**, and **Kyrgyzstan** – have set a time limit for specific emergency measures, but not for the overall emergency response.¹⁵ Despite **international pressure** to clearly set an end-date for emergency measures, only eight countries have addressed this issue, either because emergency measures initially declared without a defined time limit have ended (such as in **Indonesia** and **Mauritania**) or because recently declared measures have a time limit (such as the second state of emergency in **Hungary**).¹⁶

Among the 44 countries that show fewer violations in this quarter than at the beginning of the pandemic, many have reduced limitations on the legislature. In nine countries, which include **India**, **Namibia**, **North Macedonia**, and **Zambia**, the legislature reconvened after being dissolved or suspended earlier this year.¹⁷ Other positive changes include fewer reports of discrimination in **Bulgaria** and **Panama**, fewer cases of police violence in the execution of emergency measures in **Lebanon** and **Pakistan**, and a decrease in restrictions on the media in **Ghana** and **Sierra Leone**.¹⁸

FIGURE 3. PANDEMIC VIOLATIONS OF DEMOCRATIC STANDARDS INDEX SCORES



14 <https://new.shendetesia.gov.al/nivel-i-larte-risku-komiteti-teknik-i-eksperteve-vijone-te-mbeten-ne-fuqi-masat-e-marra-pa-afat/>
https://github.com/vdemoinstitute/pandem/blob/master/by_country/Mexico.md; https://github.com/vdemoinstitute/pandem/blob/master/by_country/The%20Gambia.md

15 <https://www.in.gov.br/web/dou/-/portaria-n-188-de-3-de-fevereiro-de-2020-241408388>; https://github.com/vdemoinstitute/pandem/blob/master/by_country/Jamaica.md
<https://www.garda.com/crisis24/news-alerts/340411/kyrgyzstan-authorities-extend-state-of-emergency-indefinitely-may-8-update-10>

16 https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Events/EmergencyMeasures_Covid19.pdf; https://github.com/vdemoinstitute/pandem/blob/master/by_country/Indonesia.md
https://github.com/vdemoinstitute/pandem/blob/master/by_country/Mauritania.md; https://njt.hu/translated/doc/J2020T0109P_20201111_FIN.pdf

17 <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1653765#:~:text=The%20Monsoon%20session%202020%20of,%2C%201st%20October%2C%202020>
https://github.com/vdemoinstitute/pandem/blob/master/by_country/Namibia.md; https://github.com/vdemoinstitute/pandem/blob/master/by_country/North%20Macedonia.md
https://github.com/vdemoinstitute/pandem/blob/master/by_country/Zambia.md

18 https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/bg_report_on_coronavirus_pandemic_november_2020.pdf
<https://apnews.com/article/health-discrimination-panama-latin-america-panama-city-ebe0dd0c38ff2b790808fbdb71f0006>
https://github.com/vdemoinstitute/pandem/blob/master/by_country/Lebanon.md; https://github.com/vdemoinstitute/pandem/blob/master/by_country/Pakistan.md
https://github.com/vdemoinstitute/pandem/blob/master/by_country/Ghana.md; https://github.com/vdemoinstitute/pandem/blob/master/by_country/Sierra%20Leone.md

19 <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/PanDem/>

20 For example, see Schedler (2006). The Panback Index captures the greater vulnerability of these grey zone countries by multiplying an average of the Pandem Index from March–June and July–September by a non-monotonic function of V-Dem’s Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) in 2019.

21 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53295551>; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/08/sri-lanka-increasing-suppression-dissent#>

22 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sri-lanka-politics-election/sri-lanka-delays-general-election-for-second-time-sets-august-5-as-new-date-idUSKBN23H1RW>
<https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-international-news-sri-lanka-elections-mahinda-rajapaksa-a04ca3a5af26c26f6961aa94449001bd>

23 https://github.com/vdemoinstitute/pandem/blob/master/by_country/Uganda.md
<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/nov/23/nowhere-to-go-the-young-lgbt-ugandans-outed-during-lockdown>
<https://rsf.org/en/news/uganda-crackdown-reporters-threatens-ugandan-elections-credibility>

24 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/09/uganda-government-to-license-online-posts-in-fresh-assault-on-freedom-of-expression/>

25 https://github.com/vdemoinstitute/pandem/blob/master/by_country/El%20Salvador.md

26 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/20/malaysia-end-abusive-immigration-detention#>; https://github.com/vdemoinstitute/pandem/blob/master/by_country/Malaysia.md

27 https://www.cjlaw.com/files/bills/pdf/2015/MY_FS_BIL_2015_38.pdf; <http://www.lawcommission.gov.np/en/archives/12240>

TABLE 1. COUNTRIES WITH A HIGH RISK OF PANDEMIC BACKSLIDING (OCTOBER–DECEMBER 2020).

Country	PanBack	LDI (2019) ²⁸	PanDem	Regime (2019) ²⁹
Sri Lanka	0.5	0.47	0.5	Electoral Democracy
El Salvador	0.44	0.44	0.45	Electoral Democracy
Uganda	0.38	0.22	0.55	Electoral Autocracy
Malaysia	0.35	0.33	0.4	Electoral Autocracy
Mexico	0.35	0.49	0.35	Electoral Democracy
Nepal	0.35	0.46	0.35	Electoral Democracy
Philippines	0.33	0.29	0.4	Electoral Autocracy

Note: Lower scores on the PanDem and PanBack indices indicate fewer recorded violations of democratic standards by emergency measures in the October–December period. The Liberal Democracy Index ranges from 0 (least democratic) to 1 (most democratic). Arrows indicate a decrease in the PanBack Index in October–December compared to July–September.

Regional developments

Figure 4 illustrates the share of countries that have experienced violations of democratic standards from March to December 2020 by region and type. The following section looks at each violation type in greater detail.

Type 1: Discriminatory Measures

Emergency measures are discriminatory if they target groups based on their race, colour, sex, language, religion, or social origin. Fourteen countries have carried out some or major violations in the form of discriminatory

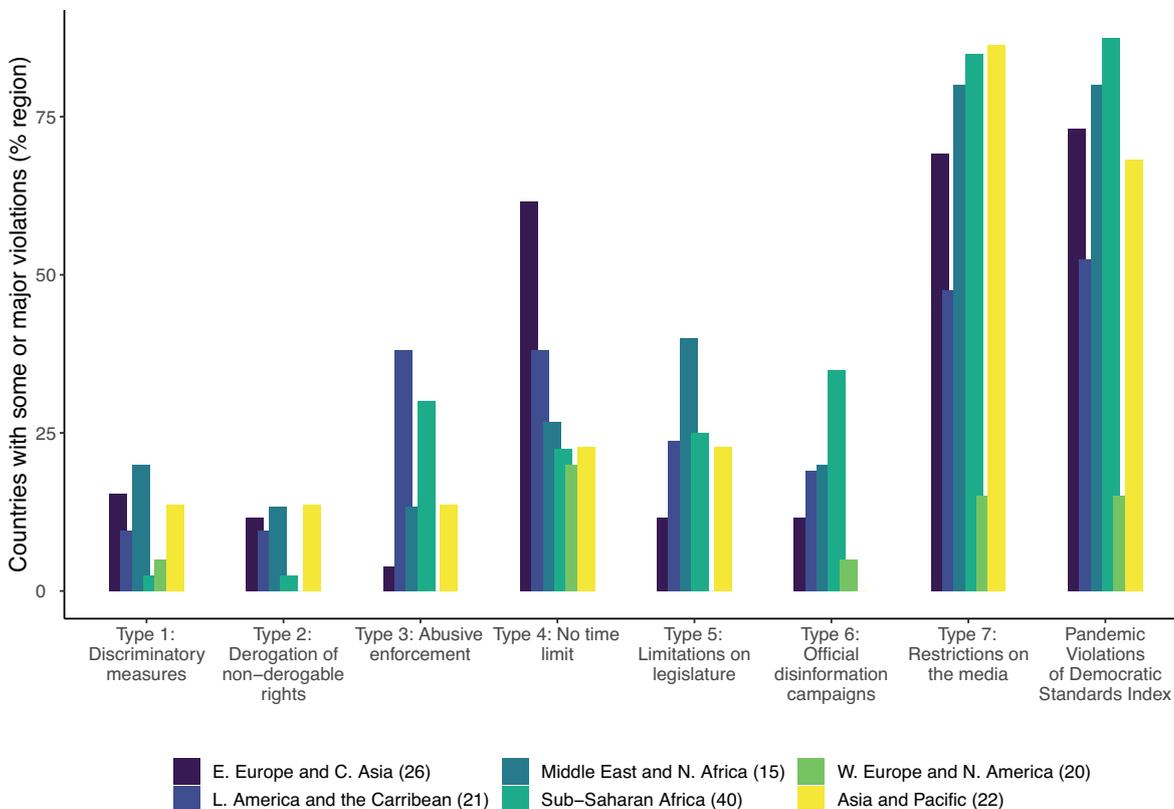
measures. Regions with the highest incidence of some or major discriminatory measures include Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Serbia and Slovakia, accounting for 15% of the region) Asia and the Pacific (Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Singapore, accounting for 13% of the region).

While restrictions on movement to curb the spread of Covid-19 are not inherently undemocratic, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Malaysia, and Singapore have targeted migrant groups with excessive restrictions on movement. In [Serbia](#), there were daily curfews for the general population and people were only allowed to leave their homes during the day until 15 May 2020 when the state of emergency was lifted. However, this has not been the case in the housing centres for refugees, migrants and asylum-seekers. Residents in these facilities continue to be placed under 24-hour quarantine. They are banned from leaving, except for medical care. These measures continue to remain in place despite there being no Covid-19 cases in these housing centres.³⁰ Similarly in [Malaysia](#), the government has detained hundreds of migrants in unsanitary and unmaintained detention camps.³¹

Type 2: Derogation of non-derogable rights

Eleven governments invoked the crisis when limiting so-called non-derogable rights, which according to the ICCPR may not be limited even in emergency situations such as the right to life and freedom from torture and cruel/inhuman treatment.³² These violations mostly took place in

FIGURE 4. PERCENTAGE OF COUNTRIES WITH SOME OR MAJOR VIOLATIONS OF DEMOCRATIC STANDARDS BY REGION (MARCH TO DECEMBER 2020, TOTAL NUMBER OF COUNTRIES IN THE REGION IN PARENTHESES)



²⁸ See Coppedge et al. (2020) and Lüthmann et al. (2020).

²⁹ See Regimes of the World (Lüthmann et al. 2018).

³⁰ <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR0125112020ENGLISH.PDF>; <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/cyr/srbija-55091114>

³¹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/20/malaysia-end-abusive-immigration-detention#>; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52515000>

³² <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/ccpr.pdf>

the Middle East and in Asia and the Pacific. For example, in Saudi Arabia migrant workers were deported and put in detention centres, because it was argued that they as a group spread the disease.³³ In the Philippines, President Duterte gave instructions to the police to “shoot to kill” people who were caught flouting the lockdown regulations.³⁴ Other violations in this region include the prohibition of Muslim burials in Sri Lanka which violates the rights of religious minorities.³⁵

Type 3: Abusive enforcement

Security forces have engaged in excessive violence to enforce the emergency measures in 26 out of 144 (18%) countries. Such actions were most commonly reported in Sub-Saharan Africa (12 out of 40 countries, or 30%) and Latin America (8 out of 21 countries, or 38%). In several low- and low to middle income countries in Africa, the police used lethal force while enforcing Covid-19-related measures. These countries included Uganda, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Rwanda, Kenya and Angola. The Kenyan police force killed at least 21 people for Covid-19 related infractions such as curfew enforcement and refusal to wear a mask.³⁶ Most reported instances of abusive enforcement in Latin and Central America occurred during protests, as was the case in high income countries such as [Chile](#) and [Colombia](#).

Type 4: No time limit

The emergency measures of 51 out of 144 (35%) of the countries do not have specific end dates or time limits. Of these 51 countries, the emergency measures have been lifted in eight but continue to be enforced in 43 countries. This has been especially visible in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region. Fifteen countries in this region continue to enforce emergency measures without any specified end date or sunset clause.

Type 5: Limitations on the legislature

About 29 out of 144 (20%) of the countries studied had instituted minor to major limitations on the legislature. This has been especially visible in the Sub-Saharan Africa and MENA regions. However as mentioned above, limitations on the legislature have softened between the third and fourth quarter of 2020 as parliamentary activities resumed.

Type 6: Official disinformation campaigns

Twenty-five countries out of 144 (17%) have carried out official disinformation campaigns related to Covid-19. Fourteen of these countries are located in Sub-Saharan Africa, accounting for about 35% of the countries coded from that region. Most of the disinformation in this region concerns two main issues. Firstly, the official promotion of hydroxychloroquine as a treatment to Covid-19. The governments of West African countries such as Togo, Senegal, and Chad have touted hydroxychloroquine as a cure against WHO guidelines.³⁷ Secondly, multiple countries within the region such as the Republic of Congo, Liberia, and Gambia received consignments of Covid-Organics, a herbal drink from Madagascar advertised as a cure and prevention for Covid-19, despite WHO guidance that there is no proof of the drink's effectiveness.³⁸

Type 7: Restrictions on the media

Restrictions on the media is the most common violation observed across all regions. Ninety-six out of 144 (67%) countries had some or major violations of media freedoms. In four regions, the majority of countries have placed some or major restrictions on the media at some point between March and December 2020, including Asia and the Pacific (86% of all countries in that region), Sub-Saharan Africa (85%), MENA (80%), and Eastern Europe and Central Asia (69%). However, we also found improvements, as media restrictions have been lifted or reduced in nine Sub-Saharan African countries and six countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia between the second to fourth quarter of the year.

Pandemic Backsliding: Risks to Democracy Persist

Pandemic backsliding has affected the regions of the world differently. A high proportion of violations occurred in the low to lower-middle income countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly regarding restrictions on the media and official disinformation campaigns. A similarly high share of violations was found in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, where regimes often imposed emergency measures without a time limit.

On a positive note, the biggest improvements from the second to fourth quarter in restrictions on the media also occurred in Sub-Saharan Africa together with Eastern Europe and Central Asia. As a continuation of the positive trend we reported in the third quarter, the latest update in mid-December 2020 shows somewhat encouraging developments compared to the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.

33 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2020/04/Covid19-makes-gulf-countries-abuse-of-migrant-workers-impossible-to-ignore/>

34 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/philippines-president-duterte-shoot-to-kill-order-pandemic/>

35 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/04/sri-lanka-religious-minorities-must-have-their-final-rites-respected/>

36 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kenya-police-idUSKCN24R0AI>

37 <https://afrique.le360.ma/maroc-algerie-autres-pays-politique/2020/06/01/30726-Covid-19-voici-pourquoi-les-pays-africains-ont-dit-non-loms-et-poursuivent-le>

38 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-madagascar-idUSKBN22K1HQ>

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ABOUT V-DEM INSTITUTE

V-Dem is a new approach to conceptualization and measurement of democracy. The headquarters – the V-Dem Institute – is based at the University of Gothenburg with 19 staff, and a project team across the world with 5 Principal Investigators, 19 Project Managers, 33 Regional Managers, 134 Country Coordinators, Research Assistants, and 3,200+ Country Experts. V-Dem is one of the world's largest data collection projects on democracy.



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