

Can Protests Steer Serbia Back Towards Democracy?

Article by Irena Pejić

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Campaigns for the Serbian parliamentary elections this spring are in full swing against a background of tensions in politics and society. The pandemic-induced crisis has come to a head, with inflation rising every day. Dissatisfaction at environmental degradation and the government's handling of the pandemic have spilled over into frequent protests. Since the partially boycotted 2020 elections, the Serbian parliament has been working without a functioning opposition, and the country's democratic crisis has only been worsened by the pandemic. There is a sense that much-needed change is afoot, but will this be enough to halt the country's slide away from democracy? Sociologist Irena Pejić surveys the pre-election landscape.

Serbia has been experiencing a decline in freedoms and democracy for some years. While democracy has been in retreat in more than half of the world's democratic countries over the past decade, Serbia has the dubious honour of belonging to the top 10 democracies that have experienced the greatest democratic decline. According to a report by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Support (IDEA), Serbia "ceased to be [a democracy] in 2020." The V-Dem Institute's 2021 annual report ranks Serbia among the five countries that are sliding the fastest into autocracy, while Freedom House's annual report for 2020 classified Serbia as a "hybrid regime" – as opposed to a democracy – for the first time since 2003.

The reports warn of the growing influence of politicians holding public office on the work of government institutions, and of increasing corruption. Public money has poured into private businesses, the public interest is ignored, and the rule of law has deteriorated. These serious allegations have been rejected outright by the Serbian authorities, with Prime Minister Ana Brnabić accusing Freedom House of "inexplicable negative bias against Serbia".

Serbia's slide towards authoritarianism has been significantly accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The first coronavirus case in Serbia was recorded in early March 2020. While the authorities initially downplayed the danger to the public, a rise in the number of cases led to a dramatic change of tack. The government declared that it was "at war" with the virus and introduced a state of emergency: unconstitutionally, according to some experts. This was accompanied by stringent anti-pandemic measures that were some of the strictest in the world. Serbia went into total lockdown, including the suspension of public transport and the closure of all businesses and institutions except healthcare facilities, pharmacies, and markets. During the declaration of the state of emergency, the president announced that the army would be brought in to guard hospitals. The following days saw soldiers patrolling the streets of the capital, Belgrade, in full military gear.

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The introduction of restrictions was accompanied by a sharpening of the rhetoric in public discourse, which became marked by extreme insecurity and panic-mongering. Daily press conferences were held with representatives of the newly-formed central crisis headquarters, and regular speeches were given by President Aleksandar Vučić. During his speech declaring the state of emergency, Vučić “concluded that Serbia has not yet recovered from the wars of the 1990s” and declared European solidarity to be “dead”. The president thus managed to combine rhetoric harking back to the old wars with a new declaration of war against the virus. He appointed new allies too: Serbia was no longer looking to the European Union but rather to the east, to China.

The state of emergency also provided an opportunity for further state capture. The 2016 Law on the Protection of the Population from Infectious Diseases provided for the establishment of an independent medical commission on the prevention and treatment of infectious diseases, but it was ignored. Instead, a central crisis headquarters was formed which included politicians, government ministers, and the prime minister in addition to representatives of the medical profession. This clearly demonstrated that the priority was to retain political control over the crisis as opposed to developing a response guided by expert scientific advice. The government’s subsequent management of the crisis consisted of enforcing various restrictive measures which certain groups within the population were unable to comply with. President Vučić took on a central role in making and implementing decisions.

Social impact of the Covid-19 restrictions

Serbian trade unions estimate that, during the first year of the pandemic, around 200,000 people lost their jobs in Serbia. There was an increase in violence against women and general violations of human rights. The introduction of the state of emergency and subsequent lockdown meant a general ban on movement for all citizens, sometimes for several days at a time, while those over 65 were not allowed to leave their houses at all. The only permissible exception was movement for work purposes, which required a special permit. Those found breaking the rules were arrested or forced to pay costly fines. One of the most extreme examples of the mismatch between the measures and reality is the fact that socially vulnerable and marginalised people such as the homeless were arrested rather than being offered state care. A similar approach was taken with migrants, who often could not leave the reception centres that housed them.

The economic shutdown caused by the state of emergency led to sizeable lay-offs within companies and factories. Most of these were achieved via the non-renewal of contracts and were therefore not included in official statistics. After the state of emergency came to an end, many factories simply introduced overtime to cover staff shortages. Covid-19 restrictions were not enforced, leading to factories becoming hotbeds of the virus. Workers often ended up in hospital and on sick leave that provided only partial wage replacement.

During the state of emergency, there was also a significant increase in domestic violence and sufferers were unable to leave their homes to escape their abusers. Despite a reduction in working hours, non-governmental organisations providing emergency helplines recorded a threefold increase in calls. Official institutions were not available, or provided conflicting information. Those who managed to report violence during the state of emergency found protection from authorities inadequate because the perpetrators received verbal warnings only.

Freedom of information and the pandemic

Public appearances by government representatives during the pandemic were generally accompanied by melodramatic statements and panic. Citizens were not given information about the actual impact of the virus and had no access to statistics. It quickly became clear that the data on Covid-19 cases and related deaths released by the government was being manipulated. An investigation by journalists belonging to the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network confirmed that the numbers were drastically higher than reported. Citizens did not have any opportunity to participate neither did they have access to the right information.

The crisis headquarters accused journalists who were critical of the situation of spreading panic and “cheering for the virus” and threatened them with imprisonment. One was arrested for publishing a story on the virus. At the same time, the pro-government media was running disinformation campaigns and slandering political opponents with impunity. Shortly after the introduction of the state of emergency, the Serbian government banned all healthcare institutions and their employees from releasing information about the pandemic: only the crisis headquarters had the right to inform the public about the situation related to Covid-19. Journalists rarely succeeded in obtaining information from other sources. This centralisation of information was maintained until public outcry forced a government U-turn.

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The poor treatment of journalists during the pandemic was unfortunately not without precedent. Although guaranteed by the Serbian Constitution and accompanying laws, media freedom in Serbia is at an extremely low level. A range of tools are used to exert pressure on journalists, including attacks by politicians, threats, and baseless accusations. The more serious consequences of working as a journalist in Serbia can include the burglary of homes and newsrooms, and even arson. Aided by a context where one party has an absolute majority in parliament and benefits from much higher visibility compared to other political actors, the scope for political influence is vast and attacks on independent media in Serbia have been a serious problem for years.

Similar deteriorations in democracy have occurred in other countries in the region. A report published in April 2020 by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung notes that states of emergency were also declared in North Macedonia, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, while lockdowns were introduced in North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Albania in addition to Serbia. It also

highlighted an increasing personalisation of power in Serbia and Albania, focusing on President Aleksandar Vučić and Prime Minister Edi Rama respectively. In countries such as Croatia and Montenegro, conversely, “medical experts are much more in the spotlight than elected officials”.

Covid-19 and the electoral process

The management of the health and social crises was closely connected with the then-upcoming parliamentary, provincial, and local elections scheduled for spring 2020. Prior to the state of emergency being declared, signatures had only been verified on nine lists. Following its introduction, pre-election activities were officially stopped. However, the ruling party had the opportunity to conduct an unofficial election campaign by usurping the entire social, political, and media space under the guise of crisis management. Non-governmental organisations called on politicians, especially President Vučić and other state officials, to refrain from actions during the state of emergency that could be interpreted as election campaigning. The political benefits accrued by the ruling party during the pandemic were manifold. A case in point is Vučić’s rapid metamorphosis from Covid-19 martyr to saviour of the nation as he procured respirators by any non-transparent means necessary and personally distributed medical equipment to hospitals across the country. He even went as far as to explain to doctors how to use them.

From quarantine, members of the general public, civil society organisations, and opposition parties accused state representatives of running a “functionary campaign”, a term for the misuse of public office and resources for political campaigning purposes which is legally undefined in Serbia. The Serbian Anti-Corruption Agency, which is responsible for combatting the abuse of public office, responded by stating that it had not noticed any violations. For her part, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić responded to the allegations by stating that, “Logically, if you’re always campaigning, then you’re never campaigning”: an excellent illustration of the attitude of the Serbian government towards the country’s institutions and democratic system.

The political climate is defined by almost constant election campaigning, scandals and harsh rhetoric; tensions are permanently raised, and there is the impression of a constant state of emergency.

When elections were finally held at the end of June 2020, the ruling party won an absolute victory. Its celebrations were unhindered by Covid-19 restrictions. Shortly before the election, the rhetoric had changed: Serbia had “won the war” against the virus. After the elections, however, the number of cases started to rise again. In July 2020, the president announced the reintroduction of harsh restrictions and the possibility of a long lockdown. This provoked a wave of protests on the streets of cities across Serbia that degenerated into violent clashes after the police deployed force against protesters. Participants were arrested, beaten, and detained – even those protesting peacefully – and large quantities of

tear gas were used against protesters. During the protests, just over 300 new cases were officially registered. At the time of writing there are 20,000 official cases and more than 50 deaths a day, and no restrictions in place. Restaurants and cafes are open, and there is no active vaccination campaign.

Environmental protests putting pressure on the government

Dissatisfaction with the Serbian government's self-serving handling of the Covid-19 pandemic is not the only issue that has brought the citizens of Serbia out on the streets over the past two years. Another is the major environmental degradation suffered by the country. A particularly serious problem is air pollution, which affects cities throughout Serbia. Belgrade is often ranked among the world's most polluted cities as a result of an ageing car fleet, heavy reliance on coal- and wood-fired heating devices, industry, stubble burning in agriculture, and the presence of open coal pits close to the city. Concerns about air pollution have led to extremely well-attended protests and awareness-raising actions over the past two years, bringing together concerned citizens, civil society organisations, activists, and political organisations.

Other major environmental issues that have sparked protests in Serbia in recent years include the construction of a rash of mini hydropower plants which threaten fish stocks and local communities' access to water, and the seizure of public green spaces by private investors for development purposes. The most high profile, however, is the highly controversial plan for lithium exploitation in western Serbia. Concerns about the environmental impacts of the proposed mine led to large-scale protests in 2021, primarily focused on British-Australian mining company Rio Tinto. Protesters blocked major roads and highways throughout Serbia, in addition to a border crossing. Although protests demanding a ban on lithium mining continue, pressure on the government has eased as the project is on pause. The environmental movement in Serbia has been expanding and increasing its capacities for two years now; actions are becoming more coordinated and organised, and pressure on the government is growing.

Democratic decline in Serbia - a way out?

For the last 10 years, a single party has been in power in Serbia. The Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) was formed in 2008 out of the split of the far-right Serbian Radical Party, which was heavily involved in the warmongering of the turbulent 1990s. In strong contrast to its predecessor, the party is nominally committed to European integration. However, the policies it pursues largely show a lack of clear political direction.

For years, the Serbian political scene has been characterised by almost constant election campaigns. As a result, the political climate is defined by scandals and harsh rhetoric; tensions are permanently raised, and there is the impression of a constant state of emergency. This represents both a strategic success for the SNS, which has been able to cement its position in the midst of political insecurity, and a failure in its duties to the people of Serbia. Instead of political manoeuvring, the party should have dedicated itself to finding real solutions to the political and social problems faced by Serbia's robbed and disenfranchised population. The country is in a difficult financial situation and the social situation is far from simple, with high levels of poverty, social inequality, and unemployment; a public sector nearing collapse; and labour rights under threat.

The frequency of elections in Serbia is evidence of both the instability of the political system and the motivation and approach of the country's ruling elites. A clientelistic network is developing in Serbia, and elections have long since lost their democratic function. Instead, the process of legitimising power has become a method of government. For Serbia's ruling elite, holding frequent election cycles despite a stable ruling majority is an instrument to build political pressure, allowing them to maintain control over resources and infrastructure that they exploit for economic gain.

Although the pandemic initially led to the consolidation of government power in Serbia, the conditions under which the population has been living for the past two years have catalysed political mobilisation against the ruling party. Even SNS supporters must be feeling uneasy because it is clear that some things in the political system, and in society, must change. The Serbian opposition, while somewhat lethargic, is trying to catch the rising wave of the environmental movement and attract voters disappointed by the government's record on environmental and social issues. However, whether this year's protests will actually succeed in changing the power relations in Serbian politics and help reverse the trend of democratic collapse remains to be seen.



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