

**Mishandling of COVID-19 Pandemic: A Challenge to the International Order****Dana Mohammed Danish Aladdin Sajadi**International Relations and Diplomacy Department,  
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**Doi: 10.23918/ejmss.V2i4p44****Published: May 1, 2022****Abstract**

The paper examines the mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the extent to which it had affected the international order, particularly where it had exposed the contradictions, injustices, and fragility of the order. The sacrifices needed to be made by the great powers were not made during the pandemic for the international system to maintain its balance and provide the support needed by the global south, as many of the weaker states found it difficult to survive, while elitism on the part of the global north had its day. The paper, through the document and thematic analysis, found that the marketization of the international system has impacted the ethics of life and death, deciding who is to live and who is to die, when and even how? Another key finding is the depiction by COVID-19 of human hierarchies that the liberal international system fails to consider, thus challenging the claim that sacrifices are made in support of the system by the developed world. In the context of the foregoing, the paper recommends that the current international order should be restructured with a view to addressing the lopsidedness, gaps, and inequalities to make the world balanced and more just, in accordance with the liberal norms and values.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, International Order, Neoliberalism, Liberal Norms, Pandemic**1. Introduction**

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the cold war era back in 1991, the world had become a unipolar system, which is run by the U.S. hegemonic power and their allies who follow and share the same western norms and values, but since that time, the liberal international order has been facing a myriad of issues and encountered a number of challenges, the most recent cases vary from the anti-terror wars on Iraq and Afghanistan, to the financial crisis, to the rising rival powers like China and Russia and regional powers like Iran, as well as the emergence of populism, particularly right-wing populism. Even the leading force backing the liberal international order, the United States, has fallen to right-wing populism under Donald Trump's administration in 2017, Covid-19 is the most recent in a series of hardships and difficulties.

Covid-19 looks less fatal than Ebola or SARS and less infectious (Callaway, 2020). It has, however, spread much broader and claimed many more casualties. Although this may be due to non-political considerations, significant actors such as the governments of China and the United States, as well as the World Health Organization, have shown glaring preventative failures, especially in the early stages of the pandemic when most of the states' governments had no idea what to do or how to handle the situation (Fu, 2020).

Since 31 December 2019 and as of week 4 2022 (352, 361, 861) cases of COVID-19 (in accordance with the applied case definitions and testing strategies in the affected countries) have been reported, including (5, 615, 437) deaths, globally (World meters , 2022). Even though the vaccine was developed and came out to the public within less than a year from the widespread of the virus, it was not sufficient to eliminate the virus permanently, and only helped to decrease the death counts. There is a lot of debate about whether the virus will vanish, or will continue and becomes regular as the seasonal flu.

### **1.1 Problem Statement**

Aside from the threat that covid-19 has posed to human health and life, the political, economic, and social implications are extensive. The paper examines the impact of COVID-19 on the International Order, given its fragility in containing global shocks thus far.

### **1.2 Research questions:**

- How does COVID-19 affect the international liberal order?
- To what extent has the pandemic exposed the fragility of the international liberal order?

### **1.3 Research Objectives:**

- To examine the impact of COVID-19 on the international liberal order.
- To analyze the fragility of the international liberal order.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 The Liberal International Order**

Every global system evolves and changes through periods of development, convergence, and crisis, leading to the formation of separate international orders distinguished by various class alliances, institutional arrangements, and ideological underpinnings (Frieden, 2006). The global system has been ruled by the western liberal values for the past seventy years, after the second world war (1939 – 1945), the United States and their allies designed and built a collaborative diversified international system centered on economic openness, liberty, human protection, and multilateral institutions.

The United States took the lead and became the main sponsor and guardian, and under the American hegemonic power and leadership, the world became a type of security community by spreading and sharing the democratic liberal values, the U.S. strengthening partnerships and alliances, stabilizing the global economy, boosting collaboration, and promoting 'free world' principles (IKENBERRY, 2018). joining the liberal order meant for the member states to benefit and enjoy the privileges from engaging in trade, exchange, and the openness of the market, which will lead to unprecedented growth in their economies, to lifting people out of poverty to the increasing development in the welfare of the citizens, and the flow of knowledge and technology that create an advanced, well-developed modern society.

These became the common principles and values that unify the democratic states around the globe and welcomes new members to their arena; if they follow and adopt the same principles. Germany and Japan before 1945, were against western ideologies and values, but because of the Second

World War, they appeared as critical allies, integrating their economic and security to the global liberal system, and their status changed from nemesis to partners. The result is a clear departure from conflicts and disputes and toward the enhancement and development of national interests. This is an essential component of Multilateralism - an institutional framework that regulates relations among a set of states based on fundamental norms of conduct (Ruggie, 2009). In other words, after WWII, liberal internationalism became more universal in its thoughts and ideas, while also becoming more tied welcome to an American-led political order (Ikenberry, 2011) based on the benefits of the free market, democracy, and human rights (Barnett, 2021).

The International order has several periods of rising and falling, but in this paper, the focus is on the period of f COVID-19 pandemic and how the international order contradicted its main values and principle from protecting humans to living a healthier life and getting access to medical care. Significantly, many critics of liberalism attribute this deterioration to liberalism's fundamental ideals rather than external causes (Deneen, 2018).

## **2.2 The Free Market**

The emergence of an updated version of the liberal system which is called neoliberalism in the 1970s was mainly about the free economic market, and these markets are likely to be the freest in countries that embrace capitalism and private property. Smith (1776) contends that the features of an ideal market create value and social advantages. He also explains how affluent individuals and powerful governments may influence markets to their advantage. He identifies three key elements of a free-market economy. They are as follows: self-interest, private rather than state investment, and wealth that benefits everyone. Technically, wealth has been produced through free market economies, but inequality has also been created as well at same time. Only those who have the power and competences can join the market and get the ultimate benefits out of it, while on the other side, many people have been suffering because of the injustice that the system has produced, however, the aim of my paper is not to observe the functionality of the free market in general rather than to put a lens on the period of the COVID-19 pandemic and how the market shaped and constituted the values, deciding who is going to live and who is going to die.

The more modern version of neoliberalism seeks to reduce the state's participation in the economy, while allowing the deep state to operate. "Human well-being may best be improved by unleashing individual entrepreneurial freedoms and abilities within an institutional framework defined by robust private property rights, open trade, and free markets (Harvey, 2005). With the absence of government, letting the individuals regulating the mechanism of market based on their private interests, without higher authority to observe and interfere or intervene; when it is necessary in the period of urgencies, the entire system collapses, leaving a heavy impact on vulnerable people who are outside the circle of the market. Despite democratic state government's assertion that the ultimate moral principle is the preservation of life, however, during the pandemic, capitalism development and market ideology have limited and diverted the moral precept of saving life by deciding who is getting access to the essential goods and medical care.

Further to the foregoing, it would be impossible to explain an almost unprecedented characteristic of the worldwide response to COVID-19 in the absence of such a principle, many states were hesitant to pay significant economic, political, and social sacrifices to save lives via lockdowns and quarantines (Fassin, 2020). We have all seen during the first early days of the pandemic most of the governments, reactions, and willingness to save lives and protect their citizens, but the long procedures of lockdowns and shutting off all the industrial production machines had affected badly on the states and the cost was very high, how long should they sacrifice the economy for the sake of saving the citizens? And the other question is that who is going to be saved and who is not going to be included in the saving operation? I am talking here about the liberal countries precisely the United States and the United Kingdom as they are the role models of and the official sponsors of the liberal system. Liberalism features inequalities in status based on property, class, and ethnicity and it is not a new phenomenon, as it has always been like that since the 19th century, liberalism's growing definition of humanity was affected by arguments about what physical and cognitive attributes a person must possess to be considered a human, as well as whether all people are genuinely equal (Peter Mathias, 2008).

Liberals like John Stuart Mill asserted that there were two types of people: those who were fully human, educated, civilized and socially advanced who belong to the western civilization, usually called the white westerners, and those who were in the process of becoming human referring to south world countries as they are still developing the required intelligence and thinking and that was how it was believed and asserted throughout the colonial era that Western powers had a mission to 'civilize' dependent nations and regions (Williams, 2018). Just after the Second World War, did the idea of equality for all humans become universally acknowledged, but it got blurred, as inequalities continue to form human hierarchical structures, especially as entangled between capitalism and markets.

### **3. Methodology**

The paper utilized the qualitative research framework or methodology, in which document analysis was used in obtaining secondary data from relevant academic works, especially books, journal articles, and other online sources that are crucial to the paper. It adopted thematic analysis in analyzing the data through carefully chosen and coherent themes. It is chosen based on its flexibility and relevance to the paper, which is qualitative in nature.

Thematic analysis refers to the foundational method for qualitative data analysis. It involves a researcher coding the qualitative data to identify themes or patterns for further analysis in ways that are relevant or related to research questions. Thematic analysis has six (6) steps, which include familiarization with the data, generating initial codes (coding), searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, naming themes, and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Similarly, the procedure for thematic analysis covers becoming familiar with the data, coding the data, searching for themes, recognizing relationships, refining themes, and testing propositions (Sunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2015).

Based on the familiarization with the data and reference to the research questions, codes and themes were generated and upon which the data were analyzed under findings and discussion.

#### **4. Findings and Discussion:**

The findings are enumerated and discussed analytically as follows:

##### **4.1 COVID-19 and Health Care Sector**

Situations such as Covid-19 demonstrated the disarray in most of the societies, especially during the first wave of the pandemic, which showcased the unpreparedness of countries that had taken pride in their health-care systems. The severe shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE) and medical supplies that been experienced since early 2020 required for healthcare workers, combating the virus outbreak inside the cities of the United States was indeed shocking (Edward Livingston, Angel Desai, & Berkwits, 2020). Medical staff demanded the federal government to deploy and deliver sufficient amount of protective equipment, safety goggles, and medical face mask, which have been shown to be effective in lowering respiratory infections among healthcare workers (MacIntyre, 2014), because according to The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), employers are required to supply free PPE to healthcare personnel whether privately held companies, healthcare insurance providers, or public hospitals, as they strive to keep expenses as low as possible (OSHA, 2007).

In theoretical framework, cost-cutting is driven by market rivalry with other providers. In practice, cost-cutting is a technique for preserving profitability or revenue, as a result, hospital administrators adopt cost-effective strategies by cutting spending in the short term in order to reduce expenses (McLellan, 2017). The absence of the government in controlling the market with the sharp decline in government funding and the emergence of the private health and insurance firms, for example, the US medical facilities have underfunded hospitals, resulting in a significant deficit of beds and 60,000 fewer personnel in public health departments now than in 2008 (Davis, 2020). The United Kingdom on the other hand, it was severely impacted and had one of the highest casualty numbers in Europe. Dr Richard Horton, the editor of the top British medical journal, The Lancet stated that austerity had "blunted the government's ambition and commitment to protect its people." Neoliberal austerity has resulted in the loss of 17,000 hospital beds, and there are far more than 40,000 unfilled nursing jobs throughout the NHS (Fouskas, 2020).

All these incorrect procedures let to exposing the health-care workers and patients to the hazards of the COVID-19, just within the first few weeks, hospitals were running out of beds, intensive health care units and all the necessary equipment. With the high rate of infected people, it was a huge shock and a chaos to handle such situation, as an outcome of four decades of neoliberalism around the globe and what they call "advanced" western economies, in particular, have left the countries completely unable to cope with a public health crisis of this size. while the world's least neoliberal states, many of which are in the global south, have fared better in the face of the outbreak. Vietnam, for example, had a successful experience with responding and containing the virus, numerous critical elements have contributed to this accomplishment, including a well-

developed public health system, a determined central government, and a proactive containment policy based on extensive testing, tracking, and quarantining. And most importantly, they learned from the previous epidemic such as SARS of 2003-2004, and since then, Vietnam has greatly been improving hospital infection control by investing in health infrastructure, organizational systems, creating physical facilities, purchasing supplies and equipment, and training health personnel (Todd Pollack, 2021).

#### **4.2 COVID-19 and Inequality**

Humanity, human rights, equality, and fair share of opportunities seemed very far from the reality of the pandemic, the pandemic crisis is an extraordinary multiplier of inequalities in the distribution of resources and risks. There are considerable disparities in resilience levels between individuals who have been able to reconcile financial and economic stability with health protection and others who have lost their jobs or enterprises and have fallen into poverty. Those who were compelled to carry on working in professions considered essential services, in contact with the people, and required to commute, and those who were able to stay and work from home (Boyeong Hong, 2021).

The pandemic observed the patterns of vulnerability and not all people are equally vulnerable and the main cause of it is the structure of the market, which determines who has the preconditions that make them vulnerable to illness (Farmer, 2004) and that is how other factors which are derived from the economic consequences effect the level of vulnerability and the impact of the of virus or disease on a person. poverty, for example, is frequently associated with poor nutrition, pollutants in water and the environment, stress, anxiety, and serious mental health issues. These cases were mostly spread it in the globe and particularly in south countries and even in most well-developed western countries. During early stages of pandemic this pattern existed, the higher rates of COVID-19 among many racial and ethnic minority groups in the United States were explained by a mixture of poverty and other environmental variables, and when members of such populations get infected, they are less likely to obtain high-quality care and leaving them at a higher risk of being ill and dying as a result COVID-19. And the policies of the U.S government deepened inequality and exacerbated the problem, when the trump administration along with republican-led states' had an anti-ACA ( affordable care act ) showed their unwillingness to extend Medicaid to enable their poorest residents access to the ACA, kept the number of uninsured Americans high, and hampered pandemic response (Scott, 2020).

Another example of the American Indian how they have been mistreated for decades, federal government kept underfunding them and the Trump Administration also had excluded them from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, for months during COVID outbreak (World101, 2020). The lower income people were unable to get a sick leave which meant poorer men and women continued to work during the pandemic despite their awareness of the high risk of getting infected because they didn't have other options therefore could not afford to lose their jobs (Max Fisher, 2020). In this regard, the labor market, as pandemic-related unemployment grows, the greatest job losses have been characterized by low industries occupied mostly by

minorities and the poor industries that are likewise more vulnerable to health concerns than those filled by higher-income Americans (cbpp, 2021).

The minority owned small business continued to suffer excessive economic losses during the pandemic due to the federal government financial security plans that covered big white-owned businesses and corporates instead of helping and aiding the small firms, which led to creating a huge gap in the socioeconomical stem by making the rich people richer and doubled their fortune during the pandemic. Billionaires' wealth has increased faster after COVID-19 began than it has in the previous 14 years. this is the largest increase in billionaires' wealth since records began, totaling \$5 trillion. And for example, if a one-time 99 percent tax on the pandemic windfall profits of the top 10 richest men applied, this could provide sufficient vaccinations for the whole planet and offers a universal healthcare and social security (Thériault, 2022). This, therefore, shows the outcome of Ineffective government handling of the pandemic, which has fractured poor and minority communities, leaving them with fewer potential wage earners in the future and perhaps more financially strained than wealthy peers who frequently had better insurance by healthcare expenditures throughout the pandemic period. Consequently, overall number of deaths for the poor citizens is substantially higher per capita than for the wealthier citizens (Ridgwell, 2020).

## 5. Conclusion

The pandemic is fundamentally a product of globalization, as it was carried from country to country on the backs of global transport, migration, and business. But more fundamentally, the impact and response of the pandemic is being filtered by long-term changes sparked by globalization in terms of what is viewed as contentious and where political contention can play out. almost all the countries were in a chaotic situation during the first couple waves of the virus specially the western states were unready and unprepared for the pandemic despite the high quality and advanced health systems, yet it has shown inability of handling the situation.

The globalized liberal international order and the absence of government in controlling or at least regulating the market, leaving the decisions done by big corporations and companies had led to a system that created winner and losers. It also has the potential to cause significant material, political, and socioeconomic division. To comprehend the implications of this centralization of power over the global markets and access to it. Researchers and scholars need to pay attention and focus on the gaps that the system generated one of them is the inequality of the hierarchal order, reshaping identities, opportunities, and options across and with the countries. The dilemma of injustice and inequality was not created by COVID-19 but it appeared long ago since the days of Ronald Regan and the ideology that emphasize on getting rid of the government because it is the real problem to the market failure and handing over all the decisions to the privet tyrannies which they structure the markets needs based on their interests, and the pandemic period made it clearly visible in most of the western states.

The pandemic, not just shed the lens on the socioeconomic problems but also has shaken the values and principle of the liberal international order when most of its beliefs didn't apply in reality specially during the first waves, we have seen closing borders between neighboring countries

specially in the European union which it was established mainly on Freedom of movement which gives citizens the right to move and reside freely within the Union, human rights and human dignity. But what exactly happened is the complete opposite the EU abandoned Italy for example when the pandemic hit hard and the virus spread rapidly things went out of control, the government and the people of Italy were suffering and seeking help from their neighboring country, calling for medical equipment's supply but there was no response from their partners and the help came from China when they sent them an airplane full of medical supplies and experts. The lack of solidarity between European states it marked one of the fragile signs of the international system, this is not a utopian model as there have been a lot of glitches and errors within the system we need to take them seriously and try to fix or restructure the order to develop a genuine economic model centered on people's needs and human rights rather than capital expansion.

## 6. Recommendations

The paper gives the following relevant recommendations in the context of the findings:

**6.1** The paper recommends for the restructuring of global political and economic power relations, especially in addressing the imbalance on the floor of the United Nations Security Council.

**6.2** It also recommends for the creation of a level playing field for all member states of the United Nations, especially in the Bretton Woods Institutions (The World Bank and International Monetary Fund – IMF). This would help in checking the excesses and injustices of the system.

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