

Is there no disease?

Anti-government activism and extremism in Denmark during the corona lockdown

In the context of a press conference held by the Danish Health Authority on September 29, 2020, during the seventh month of the COVID-19 pandemic, an individual raised the question, "Is there no disease?" (Andreasen, 2020). This individual, purporting to be a journalist from the news outlet Midtsjællands Medier, had gained access to the press conference. His inquiry was prompted by another citizen's request a few days earlier to the Danish Health Authority for access to documents verifying the existence of the coronavirus.

The question followed several international social media posts in late summer 2020 that claimed that the virus that causes COVID-19 does not exist (Reuters, 2020).

Søren Brostrøm, the Director of the Danish Health Authority, swiftly dismissed the 'myths' and false claims and affirmed the undeniable existence of the coronavirus. However, the inquirer remained far from convinced by Brostrøm's unequivocal rejection of his question. Subsequently, he conveyed his skepticism to the Danish Broadcasting Company TV2, stating, "There is something mysterious about this that does not add up. And we are not being told everything" (Andreasen, 2020).

This paper examines a new form of extremism that has emerged in recent years, known as "anti-government extremism" (AGE). Examples of anti-government extremism and activism in Denmark during the corona lockdown are analysed. The core of anti-authority extremism lies in the extreme rejection of official statements issued by public authorities and the government and the willingness to make threats or resort to violence against politicians and government officials. Although AGE finds different expressions and formations and is not always easily distinguished from legitimate dissent and government criticism Bjørge and Braddock (2022) and Jackson (2022) define one form of AGE as "movements, networks and individuals that reject the legitimacy of the government as a matter of principle and refuse to obey or submit to any authority and regulations."

Rejection of Official Authorities

In Denmark the concept of anti-authority extremism was first officially introduced in the annual report of the Centre for Terror Analysis (CTA) by the Danish National Security and Intelligence Service in 2022. The CTA assesses that the threat posed by anti-authority extremists, in general, is limited. However, it suggests that anti-authority extremist terrorist attacks in the future "may be directed at critical infrastructure or symbolic targets including buildings that are associable with public authorities or efforts to fight the pandemic, popularly elected officials and other politicians or representatives of certain public authorities." (CTA, 2022: 40) CTA's assessment is in line with international intelligence and security agencies, that have identified AGE "as an emerging threat to democracy, political processes, institutions, and elected politicians." (Bjørger & Braddock, 2022: 2). Examples of anti-authority extremism include the attack on a COVID-19 testing centre in the city Ballerup in Denmark in 2020, which the police suspect was carried out by anti-authority extremists. In 2021, a Molotov cocktail was thrown at the home of a Belgian politician after they had made positive statements about COVID-19 vaccines in the media. Anti-authority extremism does not originate from established extremist ideologies such as left-wing extremism, right-wing extremism, and militant Islamism, although in recent years it has increasingly shifted to the far-right spectrum (Bjørger & Braddock, 2022).

In contrast to classical forms of extremism, anti-authority extremism is characterized by its ability to attract individuals across traditional political divides, who unite in their shared anger directed towards the state and what they perceive as infringements on people's freedom rights. Consequently, this represents a diverse group of individuals of both genders hailing from various social backgrounds and educational levels. In Denmark, this movement is relatively small, consisting of only a few hundred individuals, but it is part of a much larger global movement of disgruntled citizens who have lost trust in their authorities.

It is noteworthy that the individual, who gained access to the press conference at the time was affiliated with the Danish political party JFK21. JFK21 holds various unconventional and conspiracy beliefs, including the idea that the world is controlled by a global alliance of Satan worshipers, that

5G radiation causes illness, and that climate change is a deception. JFK in JFK21 stands for Earth, Freedom, Knowledge, and the number 21 alludes to a myth propagated by American conspiracy theorists suggesting the return of the late President John F. Kennedy Jr. in the year 2021 (Mencke, 2018).

A small group of individuals with anti-authority attitudes organize themselves into what are known as sovereign citizens movements. Sovereignty movements serve as an umbrella term for groups that do not recognize the authority of the state and disengage from the existing societal framework. Advocates of these movements believe that by declaring themselves 'sovereign,' citizens can legally terminate their contractual obligations with the state, and, as a result, are no longer bound to comply with the prevailing laws and regulations of society. In Denmark, there have been instances in recent years where individuals associated with the sovereignty movement have resisted police arrest, produced their own license plates and identification documents, or even refused to pay fines (Kulager, 2020).

From anti-authority activism to anti-authority extremism

CTA distinguishes between anti-authority extremism on one side and a broader form of anti-authority activism on the other, although it can be challenging to separate them in practice (CTA, 2022). Anti-authority activism particularly emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, where protest groups and loosely connected networks both online and in the streets demonstrated against restrictions, lockdowns, and the introduction of vaccines. Anti-authority activists employ non-violent means in their protests and actions. After the pandemic they have evolved into a broader protest movement characterized by a general mistrust of authorities and the state apparatus. Similar to the example of the man at the press conference who doubts the existence of the coronavirus, many anti-authority activists believe that the government is lying and deceiving the population, for instance, by imposing COVID-19 restrictions. Examples of Danish anti-authority-critical parties and groups that organized demonstrations during the pandemic included the party Frihedslisten (The Freedom List), the already mentioned JFK21, and the notorious group Men In Black.

It can be difficult to distinguish between issue-driven anti-authority activism and anti-authority extremism because these groups often coexist on the same online media platforms and participate in the same protest actions. Furthermore, they tend to share the same slogans and conspiracy theories. Anti-authority perspectives easily blend with extremist views, contributing to further radicalization (Krieg 2022). Since 2020, there has been a trend where anti-authority activism has evolved from being an anti-lockdown protest movement against the government during the COVID-19 pandemic to becoming a broader and more radicalized movement that, among other things, engages in targeted campaigns against transgender individuals and incorporates various conspiracy theories into its worldview. Some researchers argue that anti-authority extremism is indicative of an increasing trend of hybridization within extremism (CTA, 2023; Jones & Comerford, 2023). Hybridization, in this context, refers to a fluid form of extremism that mixes ideologies and ideas from different extremist environments, allowing conflicting worldviews to converge based on shared enemies (CDI, 2023: 10, see also Jones & Comerford, 2023). Examples of hybridization include when anti-authority extremists adopt far-right conspiracy theories or when militant Islamists and far-right extremists inspire each other in their views on gender roles. Hybridization provides fertile ground for the development of new enemies, conspiracy theories, and methodologies. This hybrid organizational form is also characterized by fluid and leaderless organization, lacking a clear structure or fixed decision-making processes.

Men in Black

An example of a group with strong anti-authority attitudes that was highly visible in Denmark during the COVID-19 pandemic was Men In Black (MIB). Dressed in black, they marched through the dark streets of Copenhagen with torches during the lockdown, identifying themselves as freedom fighters. MIB was able to gather a diverse range of people for their demonstrations, including anti-vaxxers, anarchists, climate activists, far-right extremists, conspiracy theorists, military personnel, hooligans, football fans, or frustrated citizens who had never before participated in political demonstrations. What they all had in common was a shared anger against governmental Covid-19 restrictions and an indignation regarding how power was administered in Danish society.

In 2021, the Danish rapper Rozenberg created a battle song for MIB titled 'Mette Ciao,' referring to Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen. The song was based on the Italian resistance song 'Bella ciao' from World War II, which antifascist groups used to distance themselves from fascism and Nazism. During the 1960s, 'Bella ciao' became a widespread anthem for freedom:

Excerpt from Rozenberg's lyrics for "Mette Ciao":

[Chorus]

We march, we protest

Mette ciao, Mette ciao, Mette ciao, ciao, ciao

When it burns,

when it sings

Then it's us from Men In Black

[Verse 1]

Dressed in black, top to toe

Keeping warm when they stay together

When we stick together, there's speed

Protesting and marching

When the government breaks the law

And we ask, are lids being put on?

Why the hell were they just watching?

Staring, while it was happening

[Verse 2]

And we're dressed in black,

see my eyes behind the mask

Marching in a group from the Castle to City Hall

They try to press us down with a law on forced vaccines

But if they persist, we'll overthrow many regimes

*We don't care, we'll take up the fight,
even if it ends with us going wild
Because we're many enough,
and together we'll make Christiansborg burn
Gasoline on the same fire,
Mette at rock bottom
A society against the abyss, background*

With the use of the battle song "Mette Ciao," MIB aimed to signal that they were initiating a just struggle for freedom against a totalitarian and deceitful government, thereby attempting to legitimize their actions as a justified expression of political dissent.

Conspiratorial ideas and thought patterns

The core of anti-authority activism and anti-authority extremism is an anti-systemic critique of power, asserting that Denmark has become a surveillance state. According to anti-authority extremists, the government exploited a crisis like the pandemic to introduce special laws and restrictions, which they view as a violation of citizens' freedoms. Elements of the anti-authority ideology stem from a conspiratorial worldview, claiming that the world is controlled by a global elite of powerful individuals and organizations who manipulate governments worldwide as puppets (Krieg, 2022). Major societal crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine are perceived in this worldview as staged events and a kind of tactical diversion to capture the public's attention, allowing the government to implement special laws outside the democratic system.

Conspiracy theories create a polarization between the people and a political power and media elite. Many anti-authority extremists describe themselves as "freedom fighters" and see it as their mission to liberate the Danish people and punish those in power, whom they perceive as traitors to the nation. Some talk about an "upcoming civil war," where the population holds the government accountable and punishes the guilty (Espersen, 2022).

The anti-authority mindset is thus fueled by existing conspiracy theoretical thought patterns that contribute to a critique of the power elite. This includes conspiracy theories such as The Great Reset and Plandemic. The so-called Great Reset theory posits that a small powerful elite controls the entire global development through technology or major international crises, which are used to further restrict citizens' freedoms. According to Plandemic conspiracy theories, the coronavirus pandemic was actually created in secret laboratories by the World Health Organization (WHO), the pharmaceutical industry, the world elites, and governments, along with the multi-billionaire Bill Gates, with the purpose of controlling the world's populations and making billions from a COVID vaccine.

Although anti-authority extremism, as mentioned earlier, does not directly stem from any existing extremist groups, there is sometimes an overlap, especially with right-wing extremism and right-wing extremist conspiracy theories about an elite of left-wing politicians, wealthy individuals, and Jews who want to take over world domination or transform Europe into a Muslim state. The conspiracy theories thus contribute to radicalizing anti-authority extremism and legitimizing distrust in the system (Krieg, 2022; Bjørgo & Braddock, 2022).

There is a tendency for anti-authority extremism to become a broad umbrella term or perhaps even a catch-all designation, where a variety of elements can be thrown in, as long as there is resistance to the established system. The category is often used to describe everything from people protesting the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic and conspiracy theorists to supporters of alternative lifestyles skeptical of vaccines or hooligan-like protesters causing trouble. What these different groups have in common is a desire to reject authorities and those in power, without having a clear idea of what societal system should replace it.

During the coronavirus crisis in Denmark, the activist variation of anti-government attitudes has been predominant. Anti-government opposition has been mostly non-violent and issue-driven against governmental Covid-19 restrictions. However, verbal attacks on politicians and institutions, harassment against government representatives and civil servants and anti-government demonstrations may harm democratic institutions and processes and cause polarization in society.

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