17th April 2020

Dear Ms Atwood,

On 15th April you explained to the BBC that the current situation we live in is "not a dystopia". You are right. The attempts by governments to protect us from a health emergency are not "deliberate totalitarianism". But as you know better than anyone else, Gilead did not start as a totalitarian state, it started with the slow erosion of human rights in a context of instability.

We find ourselves in a new status quo: where unity is expected in the face of a collective threat; where reluctance to 'politicise' the crisis means there is inadequate scrutiny on governments when we need it more than ever; where the fear of spreading misinformation makes journalists reluctant to question the official narrative. So we all need to be more vigilant and more sceptical about how governments are rapidly reshaping our societies. A government may not set out to design a dystopia, but that doesn't mean it won't happen by accident.

But there is also a more banal observation. Covid-19 has brutally exposed the fault-lines that have existed in our societies for so long. Millions of people already lived in dystopian precarity. Now millions more are starting to find out that their previously comfortable lives have only the flimsiest of safety nets before they too fall into the same dystopia - punitive benefits systems, inadequate healthcare, ravaged economies, and bleak futures with opportunities atrophying. While things may get better for many, "better never means better for everyone... It always means worse, for some."

And then there is policing. We're already seeing overzealous policing across the world. How long before this calcifies into perpetual draconian policing? Whether through remotely tracking people using contact-tracing apps, or being asked to 'show me your papers' on the street, we are rapidly ceding ever more power to our governments. In the depths of a public health crisis, this may well be sensible and proportionate, but will it suit governments to give up power once the crisis is over? The massive surveillance architecture that was established post 9/11, and remains to this day, is perhaps our most recent historical warning



of how emergency powers have a habit of lingering long after they're needed and eventually becoming a new normal.

We are facing a threat we poorly understand and for which most countries are unprepared. Governments want to be seen to be 'doing something'. These days, doing something often involves relying on technology - and surveillance technology in particular. If all you have is a hammer everything starts to look like a nail, as they say.

We need to be open to exploring every solution that could help us protect populations – after all, we have all willingly given up our freedom of movement, something no one could have imagined in Western democracies just a few weeks ago - but we should not just accept every solution presented, without proper safeguards or guarantees. It does not take much for a tracking app to become an enforcement one.

So *especially* if we are in for a long run, giving up our most fundamental rights cannot be the price we pay to protect public health. We will need to ensure that exceptional measures remain exceptional. A government that can track our every move via an app we have downloaded may not come across as deliberate totalitarianism, but we will need to ask ourselves if this is the world we want to return to once the lockdown ends - and we have the right to say it is not. Gilead is a powerful reminder of what our future societies can head inexorably towards if we fail to protect and cherish our freedom to be human.

In solidarity

Privacy International

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