Corona virus stresses democracy? Selected tales from around the world - and some points for reflection

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Reflection points

- Long term and broader trends / or underlying weaknesses / 'cracks' in social, economic or political systems
  - General global decline in democratic tenets - conduct of free and fair elections and political participation, the rule of law, and respect for fundamental freedoms since 2006 (Freedom House)
- New or emerging issues as a result of emergence measures
- Reflection on history: extent to which we can go back in history to understand trends, and extent to which lessons from previous pandemics can be applied to current scenarios
- *Herbert, S. & Marquette, H. (2021) demonstrate that, so far, some of the bigger cracks that have widened and deepened, so to speak, throughout the crisis reflect weak leadership, poor capacity and low levels of accountability, in most cases pre-dating the current crisis. Indeed, one area where COVID-19 is likely to transform the field [governance] is in our **understanding of leadership, political and otherwise**.*
- Caution in drawing conclusions or providing advice
- But also – our rights in relation to our **faith, responsibilities and professionalism**
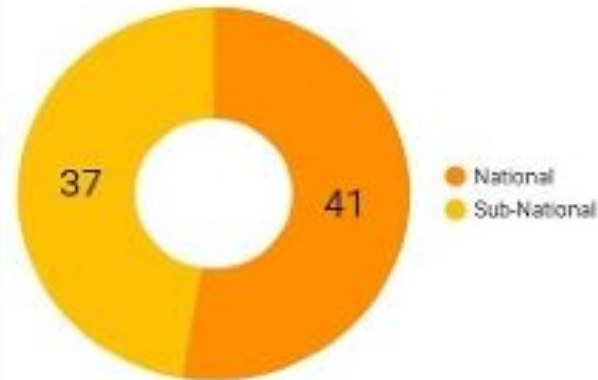
Civil and political rights and implications on democracy

- Parallel 'pandemic'?

- Genuine public health crisis requiring restrictions of certain freedoms *i.e gatherings* in order to contain it versus repression

- The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) provides for certain derogations and restrictions, in the context of *emergencies [time bound, no intrusion and plans to return to normal]*
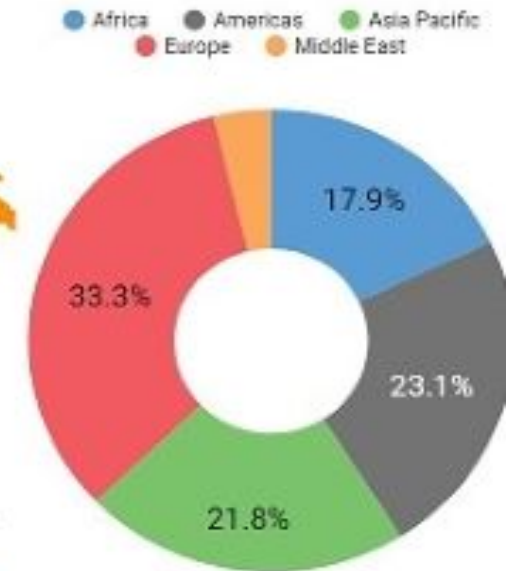

- **No scarcity of analytical pieces**
  - *International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)- The Global Monitor of COVID-19's Impact on Democracy and Human Rights; a qualitative monitor and a "one-stop-shop" online global monitoring tool/of the democracy and human rights implications of measures adopted by governments around the world in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, specifically in the 162 countries included in International IDEA's Global State of Democracy (GSoD) Indices.*

- **Emergency declarations**

- **Restrictions on freedom of assembly**

- **Information integrity /Surveillance and privacy** concerns in many countries –over 100 CSOs globally expressed concern in 2020 April (Human Rights Watch)

- **Elections and political competition (IDEA)**
  - ***Burundi:*** *Potential laws to favour the ruling party - calls for postponement ignored, no health precautions taken during campaign, no international observers allowed, landslide victory for incumbent*

National and Subnational Elections Postponed

National and Subnational Elections Postponed (donut chart):
- National: 41
- Sub-National: 37

Click on the chart for more information
(Double click to reset)

Elections Postponed in

78

Countries and Territories

Regional breakdown (donut chart):
- Africa
- Americas
- Asia Pacific
- Europe
- Middle East

- Africa: 17.9%
- Americas: 23.1%
- Asia Pacific: 21.8%
- Europe: 33.3%

Click on the chart for more information
(Double click to reset)

FROM 21 FEBRUARY 2020 UNTIL 24 APRIL 2021:

- at least 78 countries and territories across the globe have decided to postpone national and subnational elections due to COVID-19, out of which at least 41 countries and territories have decided to postpone national elections and referendums;
- at least 117 countries and territories have decided to hold national or subnational elections despite concerns related to COVID-19 of which at least 96 have held national elections or referendums;
- at least, 52 countries and territories have held elections that were initially postponed due to concerns related to COVID-19 of which at least 28 have held national elections or referendums

Impact on social and economic rights: the poor and marginalised

- Evidence from previous disasters reveals that losses disproportionately affect poor people

- May have variations in vulnerability across the developed and developing world but also many common features such as loss of incomes, uncertainty about the future, disruption in social networks / connections, etc

- Poor, informal workers, urban populations, refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs), women and girls, youth, healthcare professionals, prison populations and military personnel among affected

- Zambia and Tanzania border and border closure

quarantines during the first wave livelihoods for the poor

On trust in fighting the pandemic (Hebert and Marquette, 2021)

- Fukuyama (2020a) argues that it will ultimately be "**the state's capacity** and, above all, trust in government" that will determine how effective COVID-19 responses are, especially "whether **citizens trust their leaders, and whether those leaders preside over a competent and effective state**"

- Government response – proactiveness or "distraction and complacency" have potential to intensify the surge

  - **Often pre- existing low levels of public trust in government / institutions undermining citizens compliance to COVID measures or health polices**

  - Low literacy levels, citizens thinking disease was a ploy for governments to receive foreign aid / the nexus with corruption; exclusion of religious leaders & others leads to limited or no dialogues

  - Accountability – ?

  - **Transparency of information**

- But trust changes over time – 'trust honeymoon' – could this have been the case during the second wave in most countries? Zambia? Tanzania, India…?

- Researchers call for further **"understanding of how political trust operates in much wider range of contexts"** among others

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Research indicates what an effective COVID-19 response looks like in a high trust environment.

Mauritius – an upper middle-income island state – has been heralded by Blin and Auerbach (2020) as a COVID-19 success story with high public compliance with state responses so far. Its paternalistic, though democratic, political leadership faced little opposition in prioritising public health over the economy and so was able to rapidly implement a number of measures: a very strict curfew system; daily TV briefings emphasising collective responsibility and drawing on longstanding norms of national unity; rapid testing, tracing, isolation and treatment; free healthcare for all COVID-19 patients; and a implementation of health policy in general"

India: The number of infections detected hit new records, with some 380,000 on April 28th alone. The official death toll surpassed 200,000, though evidence grew that many more fatalities are going unrecorded. Shortages of beds and oxygen afflicted many hospitals. The government ordered Twitter to remove posts critical of its handling of the epidemic, sparking widespread outrage. India now accounts for around 40% of the world's new recorded infections (The Economist, April 28)

Our faith and personal responsibility

- **Often impressive external facing actions:** solidarity of individuals and CSO coming to support governments or others in need

- **How and why we need to do more:-**

- **Before God, we are equal – service of God and each other**

- **Our faith is our relationship with God:** How I feel; What I think; -What my faith asks of me-
  - Our rights come with a responsibility – loving others as we would want them love us –

    - Care for the environment (Genesis 2:15) Laudato Si Nos 49, 91
    - and care for each other [Our brothers' / sisters' keepers] – Where is your brother? Where is your sister? Gen 4: 9 – "intergenerational solidarity is not optional" (USSB)

  - Our faith gives us rights and freedoms
  - Does our faith provide us a menu of picking what we want or think?
  - What does it mean when we are told we are to be *"the light of the world and salt of the earth" (Mathew 5:13-16)*

- **Possibility of exposure**
  - Deficiencies in deep self examination
  - How our actions contribute to wider and big picture stories or outcomes i.e contribution to mis/disinformation: *'We're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic'* Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (2020)

- **On leadership:-** leading by example; listening; being good followers

- Pastoral guidance / accompaniment in our professional journeys

- **Our individual actions' -** potential to galvanise or lead to collective good

References

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- Global Democracy and Human Rights Impacts of COVID-19: In Brief: June 26, 2020 Congressional Research Service: https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R46430.pdf

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- Herbert, S. & Marquette, H. (2021). COVID-19, governance and conflict: emerging impacts and future evidence needs. K4D Emerging Issues Report. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies.

- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USSB): https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/care-for-creation