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THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

COVID-19 AND GEOPOLITICS

Hassan Khannenje

THE COVID-19 pandemic has hit Africa the worst in the realms of trade, economic growth, employment, public revenue collection, security, and, critically, democratic governance. According to the World Bank, for the first time in 25 years, Africa slid into an economic contraction of up to 5.1 percent in 2020 alone. The resource-rich economies of Nigeria, Angola, and Cameroon in sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, were even worst hit due to attendant shocks in the international oil market. Africa's exports, which depend over 80 percent on global markets—especially in the worst-hit economies in North America, Western Europe, and Asia—have plummeted. This has further compounded increasing income inequalities and unemployment on the continent, thereby pushing millions of people in the region deeper into poverty.

Fundamentally, the coronavirus pandemic has proven to be a boon for authoritarianism in Africa, as democratic

governance wilts under the weight of governments' embrace and abuse of emergency powers to muzzle democratic institutions and processes, undertake a convenient clamp down on civil liberties, and aggressively impose limitations on political space for their citizens.

The duality of contracting economies and increased authoritarianism have reversed the positive economic trajectory of Africa's growth decade as well as sullied the democratic dividends of the post-Cold War period.

PANDEMIC CHAOS, AFRICA'S FATE

The apparent lack of global leadership in the current pandemic is, of course, partly a result of America's initial COVID-19 denialism and the isolationist approach favored by Donald Trump, but is also due to the failure to mobilize robust and coordinated international response in the wake of nationalism and protectionism as well as the

utter unpreparedness of many countries to deal with the scale and scope of the pandemic.

This lack of leadership has exposed the tragedy of inequalities in the developing world. Consequently, as many countries in western and central Europe, North America, and parts of the Asia-Pacific region begin to enter the recovery phase, Africa is still wallowing in the miasma of economic, social, and political ruins without

either the privilege afforded by the social safety-nets of the rich countries or a local capacity to produce vaccines or facilities needed to adequately care for the sick and the vulnerable.

On the one hand, Africa lags behind in mass testing and vaccination primarily due to a dearth in regional capacities and also because of the disruption of global supply chains. As of late June 2021, only about two doses of vaccines have been administered per 100 people, compared with an average of 68 doses per 100 people in high-income countries. Less than 1 percent of Africa's total population has been fully vaccinated. Tanzania, Burundi, and Eritrea have yet to receive any vaccines; others have barely started their vaccination campaigns.

Vaccine geopolitics in the form of vaccine nationalism and geopolitical competition among contending world powers like the United States, the EU, China, and Russia—each all keen on shaping the war against COVID-19

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narrative—have further impeded vaccine access and distribution, thereby denying the world a unified global approach to managing the pandemic. All this helps explain the widespread African perception of vaccine apartheid by the global north against the global south.

On the other hand, the economies of Africa are crumbling under the weight of massive foreign debt, partly exacerbated by increased public expenditure and a revenue slump as a result of the onset and consequences of the pandemic. Africa is thus staring at a potential debt crisis. In November 2020 for instance, Zambia—one of Africa's most heavily indebted countries—defaulted on servicing its eurobond debt whilst others such as Namibia, Angola, Kenya, Ethiopia, South Africa, and Nigeria were badly exposed to fiscal pressures, making the necessity of debt restructuring an emerging urgency.

Africa's recovery, together with that of the rest of the developing world, is thus worsened by a conspicuous absence

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of global political leadership on vaccine access and the economic and fiscal stabilization of middle-income and low-income economies. The increased mass vaccination and economic stimulus packages that are allowing for the reopening of the economies of United States, the European Union, China, Japan, and so on, are limited to the world's rich and powerful countries. Much of the developing world is thus still in the containment phase of the pandemic while developed countries are already in the early phase of recovery.

Africa's recovery is worsened by a conspicuous absence of global political leadership on vaccine access and the economic and fiscal stabilization of middle-income and low-income economies.

Cumulatively therefore, the nationalistic vaccine patency protection exercised by developed countries and the absence of a unified global crisis management approach is entrenching multidimensional inequalities on the continent in ways that guarantees a slower recovery, at best, and economic stagnation, at worst.

EMERGING AUTHORITARIANISM

In a bid to consolidate power, a number of governments in Africa have exploited the international distraction caused by the pandemic and the emergency powers afforded by the need to contain the pandemic to advance patently illiberal measures. For instance,

elections in Tanzania, Chad, Congo, Djibouti, Benin, Uganda, and elsewhere have been marred by gross systematic interference by the respective state apparatuses, with allegations of electoral fraud and blatant violations of human rights.

In Tanzania, the opposition was virtually wiped out of parliament with the then President John Pombe Magufuli winning reelection with over 85 percent of the votes. Months later, the president would die from what the opposition claimed were complications related to COVID-19 despite his denialist stance against the virus. Similarly, President Idris Déby of Chad won his sixth term in April 2021 while postponing (for a fifth time) parliamentary elections. Following Déby's sudden death on the battlefield with rebels in April 2021, a transitional military council led by his son Mahmat Déby suspended the country's constitution and assumed power for what it claims to be transitional period of 18 months.

Again, COVID-19 distractions meant that such unconstitutional moves by the military attracted only 'muted' and mild reactions both from regional organizations such as the African Union as well as the international community.

Ethiopia presents perhaps the worst-case example of the impact of COVID-19 on democracy in the region after the decision to postpone elections by the Ethiopian government in June 2020 sparked off an armed conflict in the country's Tigray region. Tigray's ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), went ahead and held regional elections against the federal government's directive, setting in motion a series of events that culminated in the armed conflict that drew in Eritrean forces as proxies of the Ethiopian government and created an internationally deplored humanitarian crisis.

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While Addis Ababa's actions in Tigray have attracted widespread international condemnation and destroyed the peacemaker and reformer image of prime minister and Nobel Peace Prize winner Abiy Ahmed, it has fundamentally altered the democratic trajectory of the second-most populous country on the continent. With over 110 million people, Ethiopia's potential and imagined future may never be realized in the near term. (In the end, elections took place in June 2021. Boycotted by the opposition (some of whom were detained), the electoral process was marred by irregularities.)

The presidents of Burundi, Guinea, Somalia, and Uganda have equally exploited COVID-19 restrictions and public safety protocols to muzzle the opposition and consolidate power. Notably, the Ugandan government banned in-person gatherings and rallies, and also required presidential candidates to use mainstream and social media (whose access was regularly limited). In fact, President Museveni's government, which has strong influence over the Ugandan media, regularly blacked-out the opposition from the mainstream media and

cracked down on the leading opposition figure, musician turned politician Robert Kyagulanyi's campaign activities. Commonly known as Bobi Wine, his in-person gatherings and political rallies were curtailed, with officials citing the risks posed by super-spreader events.

In the lead up to election, the Burundian government, for its part, exploited a 14-day quarantine requirement to lock out regional and international election observation missions, while Guinea's president, Alpha Condé, declared an indefinite ban on political protests in the wake of his controversial re-election.

Elsewhere, Somalia is hanging delicately on the brink of collapse after 30 years of trying to form a viable government and decades of stabilization efforts. This follows sustained protests and violent confrontation between opposition and pro-government forces in the country's capital Mogadishu in April 2021, even as the incumbent president, Mohammed Ahmed Mohammed "Farmaajo," imposed a ban on street protests under the pretext of enforcing COVID-19 safety protocols, following repeated election delays and a parliamentary extension of his term. While parliament has since rescinded the decision on Farmaajo's term extension, political tensions remain high, emanating from the stalemate over elections and fragmentation of the country's military and police forces.

ELUSIVE SECURITY

While security remains a complex concept and an ideal to be pursued by many nations, physical security is critical to the basic functioning of any nation that is not a failed state. This has been at the core of Africa's agenda and the African Union's "Silencing the Guns" initiative had set the year 2020 as the deadline for achieving the end to violent conflicts, prevention of genocide, gender-based violence, civil wars, and all wars in the region.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted regional governments' focus

and seriously undermined efforts at responding to traditional security threats. This came about as a result of at least two factors: first, diminished regional cooperation on security; second, resource and policy divestment from conflict prevention, counter terrorism, and counter-insurgency into the fight against the coronavirus pandemic and its attendant economic and social disruptions.

Africa is thus currently engulfed in a wave of twin strands of violent conflicts: terrorism and militant insurgency. We can see this in one wave from North Africa in Libya down into the Sahel where Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad are trapped in flare-ups of insurgency and militant Islamist attacks. In the Horn of Africa, Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Central African Republic (as shown by the rebel siege over the capital, Bangui) are similarly faced with multiple violent conflicts and insurgencies. The region's security is further punctuated by Jihadist spread of groups such as Al Shabaab in Somalia, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahel (ISGS) in the Sahel, and Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in the Lake Chad Basin region.

A second wave stretches from Somalia, through Kenya and Tanzania,

to Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in which the Somalia-based al Shabaab continues to carry out terror attacks in Kenya and Somalia, while Ahlu Sunna Wa Jama (ASWJ, also known as Al Shabaab, and having no connection to Somalia) in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado region has killed thousands and displaced over 700,000 people amid ineffective and counterproductive military response by Maputo as well as delays in regional military response through the Southern African Development Community (SADC). On the other hand, eastern DRC, while still an active hotspot for insurgency groups and ethnic conflict, has also fallen victim to Islamist attacks from the Ugandan Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), which have escalated since 2019.

A NEW FRONTIER

Already a new frontier of global geopolitics, the pandemic has further opened the geopolitical space in Africa to a multiplicity of actors pursuing varying and competing interests, oftentimes at the expense of regional security and stability. For instance, outside the military basing by major powers in Djibouti, geopolitical rivalry and competition among emerging powers have remained intense in the Horn of

Africa and to some extent in the Great Lakes region, with Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, and CAR serving as epicenters.

In Somalia, the country's transition has been hijacked by the geopolitical "Gulf Cold War" contestations of Middle Eastern powers that have supported competing parties, with Turkey and Qatar viewed as supporting the federal government in Mogadishu while the UAE and Saudi Arabia are seen to be sympathetic

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to the periphery and political opposition, contributing to the recent electoral stalemate and threatening a return the country to the warlordism of the 1990s. Meanwhile, the country's international partners, led by the United States, the EU, the UN, Norway, UK, Germany, and Canada have sustained pressure on the incumbent Somali administration to facilitate democratic elections and ensure a smooth and peaceful transition. It remains to be seen whether the incumbent government of President Farmaajo will follow through with recent commitments to hold elections based on the September 2020 agreement.

In Sudan, the transitional government under civilian-military power sharing arrangement formed in 2019, has come under heavy geopoliti-

cal strains with the military wing overreaching its powers and mandate. The Middle Eastern powers (UAE and Saudi Arabia) and Russia have significantly increased strategic support to the military faction of the Sudanese government, against Western powers' push for democratic reforms, peace consolidation and transition to civilian rule. The civilian-military tensions remain the greatest threat to Sudan's transition and to the peace agreements with various rebel groups in the country.

In Central African Republic, Russia and France have been jostling for influence in a country besieged by over 14 rebel groups and held loosely together by a fragile transition and an ever-unraveling peace agreement. Such pervasive competing external influence at a time of weakened institutional development and contracting economies occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated instabilities across Africa, further dampening the prospects for peace, security, and stability on the continent.

THE PATH TO RECOVERY

For Africa, the path is murky and recovery will require a combination of measures beyond containing the public health crisis and rebuilding economies. The massive health and economic vulnerabilities exposed by the pandemic, while not limited to Africa, have been worse on the continent,

owing to chronically limited capacities in healthcare, near complete medical technological dependency on outsiders, and the virtual absence of any social safety nets for its people.

Hence a number of key measures should be considered which, inter alia, must include mass vaccination, economic support and restructuring, enhanced intra-continental trade, the restoration of democratic institutionalism, the establishment of local health infrastructure capacities and resilience systems, and the embrace of both effective multilateralism and meaningful regional coordination and integration. Each of the measures are discussed in more detail below.

First, *mass vaccination*. Ensuring sufficient COVID-19 vaccine roll-out in Africa is important for the continent's recovery. The African Union and the World Health Organization, through its COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) facility, are promising to provide vaccines to cover up to 30 percent of the continent's population by end of 2021, with about 600 million doses to be distributed by end of July 2021. However, even if these happen as projected, this is still short of the projected 60 percent coverage necessary to build resilience against the pandemic in Africa. Global solidarity and support from the international community is critical in ensuring a just and equitable

distribution of COVID-19 vaccines to low- and middle-income countries in Africa. One way of achieving this is the need for the relaxation of intellectual property rights to boost vaccine production locally.

So far, the U.S. has signaled strong support for the application of Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) waivers at the World Trade Organization (WTO) to allow for the transfer of the vaccine's intellectual property and related technology to other countries to boost the production of safe and effective vaccines. This is a positive show of goodwill—although it must be further demonstrated by signing an actual TRIPS waiver, if in fact a just and equitable recovery is to be made possible for developing countries. Other vaccine producing countries such as UK, China, and Russia should also support the TRIPS waiver idea. This must be accompanied by an end to vaccine geopolitical rivalry in Africa—particularly ongoing Western pressures on Chinese and Russian vaccines. Africa has become a casualty of vaccine geopolitics, pure and simple.

Second, *economic support and restructuring*. Many African countries will need economic and fiscal as-

sistance as well as internal structural reforms to recover from the double effect of mounting foreign debt pressure and pandemic-related increased public expenditures and revenue loss. For instance, Mozambique was already struggling to repay its \$14 billion external debt even before the pandemic struck. With COVID-19, the country's debt-to-GDP ratio ballooned from 100 percent in 2018 to 130 percent in 2020, exacerbating its growing debt crisis.

According to a recent study conducted by the African Union, Africa is set to loose over \$500 billion because of COVID-19, with most countries forced to borrow heavily to survive the pandemic. To address the continent's debt crisis, multilateral efforts to cancel, restructure, and/or suspend debt servicing should be intensified by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the Paris Club of Nations. The COVID-19 Debt Service Suspension Initiative adopted by the G20 and the World Bank in April 2020 was commendable. It failed to reduce the net value of the debt, however, and so another instrument or a set of structural programs should be adopted to help Africa stabilize its debt-ridden economies.

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Lastly, efforts at respective bilateral levels should be pursued—especially by the heavily indebted countries to bilateral lenders such as China—to restructure debts either through rescheduling or review of terms.

Third, *enhanced intra-continental trade*. Economic recovery in Africa will to a large extent depend on how African countries deepen intra-regional trade and economic cooperation. Expediting the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area will be a good starting point for a “developmental regionalism” approach to integration in the post COVID-19 environment.

This will enable the building and strengthening of continental-wide and intra-continental value chains, promoting fair trade and strengthening economic governance systems for sustainable growth. Overreliance on international markets has dangerously exposed African economies to external shocks, making them hostage to the demand needs of the global north.

Fourth, *restoring democratic institutions*. Complete recovery will be impossible without rebuilding of Africa’s democratic institutions, strengthening its democratic processes, and

stabilizing governance and the rule of law. The region’s development partners should thus begin to robustly engage regional governments on practical steps regarding how to reverse the wave

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of authoritarian state capture. Programs to enhance the capacity of democratic institutions to perform their core functions and re-establish checks and balances, address corruption, and strengthen the civil societies on the continent should be pursued through development cooperation.

Furthermore, robust interventions in the governance sector, security partnerships, and security cooperation will remove pockets of jihadism and extremist ideology that is antithetical to liberal democracy. Such measures hold the promise of transforming existing violent extremist conflicts in parts of the continent to manageable levels. However, a consensus between regional actors and international partners under the auspices of the UN Security Council is needed to strengthen sanctions regimes on spoilers to peace agreements and violators of human rights in various conflict theatres in Africa.

The 2012 African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance and the 1999 Algiers Declaration on Un-

constitutional Changes of Government are the continent’s main instruments to advance the consolidation of democracy, constitutionalism, good governance, human rights protection, and the right to development. The African Union Commission and the African Union Assembly of Heads of State and Government should develop new mechanisms of safeguarding democratic rule and human rights in the region by looking at democracy as an indispensable aspect of national and regional development. With democratic consolidation, conflict prevention and management as well as positive peace will not merely be aspirational ideals of a renewed Africa, but also will be critical milestones that will form a basis for the African renaissance.

Fifth, *building resilient health systems*. Amidst the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Africa, the silver lining lies in the realization of the long-term need to invest in resilient systems to shore up Africa’s preparedness in future pandemics and crises. These include stronger public health infrastructure, infectious diseases research, and surveillance and control systems. While most African governments and regional bodies such as the African Union have traditionally anticipated military threats and perhaps violent conflicts, and by extension food insecurity, public health crises should demand equal attention in Africa. The post-COVID-19 era should thus be

marked by regional and international efforts to build infectious diseases research infrastructure and technical capacity, as well as transfer of vaccine technologies to establish resilient systems to prevent and sustainably manage future pandemics.

African governments, through partnership with Africa’s development partners such as the United States, the European Union, and China, should expand the capacity of the Africa Center for Disease Control and mobilize funding for research and development to strengthen Africa’s capabilities against public health crises. The United States, for instance, has prioritized combating infectious diseases domestically and abroad as one of its foreign policy objectives, and President Joe Biden has pledged to re-embark on global leadership against infectious diseases. America is already an important partner in Africa’s fight against Ebola, HIV/AIDS, Malaria, Tuberculosis, and other non-infectious but malignant diseases.

Decentralization of infectious diseases research as well as development infrastructure and capacities will further help the global community—especially the global south—to develop regional surveillance and early response mechanisms of stopping future pandemics, at the initial outbreak stage or locking down pandemics to regions of origin for effective management.

Sixth, *embracing multilateral solutions*. The COVID-19 pandemic was exacerbated by the lack of a clear and robust multilateral response as well as by the lack of consensus and leadership. This overall lack of coordination was especially the result of extant Sino-American trade wars, American isolationism under Trump, and the attendant rise in nationalism in global capitals.

The only global mechanism of leadership in this pandemic has remained the World Health Organization, which came under heavy criticism, funding cuts, and credibility charges from the United States. African multilateral efforts suffered from a lack of technical capacity, clarity of approach, and dependency on developments in the developed world.

Going forward, the international community should develop a mechanism of prioritizing multilateral approaches to global and regional crises management to prevent and mitigate crises as well as quicken a recovery that is devoid of global geopolitical struggles.

Seventh, *deepening regional integration*. To limit the destabilizing impact of uncertain external markets,

geopolitical rivalry, and competition in Africa, but also to develop regional resilience against trade, health, and economic shocks, African governments will need to intensify efforts towards regional integration.

Through the \$3 trillion Africa Continental Free Trade Area, the world's largest free trade area, the continent stands to boost regional trade beyond current levels by exploiting the potentialities of the economies of scale.

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the region to build stronger industrial, labor, and technical capacities to boost its growth and development prospects.

Lastly, regional political integration—but not necessarily vertical integration—will help the region to advance common foreign policy objectives and increase its political bargaining power internationally. This will help to limit malign foreign influence on individual states from competing external powers.

DEMOCRACY AND GROWTH

In the final analysis, while the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the general state of unpreparedness for much of the world, it has revealed vulnerabilities created by

extreme inequalities in access to health-care between the global north and the global south—especially countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Owing to chronic lack of testing and treatment facilities, we may never know the actual number of deaths as a result of COVID-19 in Africa. Worse still, limitations on vaccine access and mutations in COVID-19 variants means that we cannot project when the continent can start its full recovery. Democratic reversal, insurgent conflicts, and increasing terrorist and extremist threats fundamentally affect the prospects of the immediate recovery by the continent.

Owing to chronic lack of testing and treatment facilities, we may never know the actual number of deaths as a result of COVID-19 in Africa.

The pandemic has further demonstrated how intricate interdependencies and globalized security issues can worsen in the context of sharp inequality, major geopolitical fall-outs, and a lack of concerted North-South efforts to globalize infectious diseases research infrastructure. Despite Africa being stuck in its second and third waves of the pandemic, its economies are estimated to bounce back with a modest growth rate of between 2.3 percent and 3.4 percent for 2021, according to the World Bank. However, without vaccines and in the wake of apparent instabilities, even these modest projections remain merely optimistic probabilities.

While the initiative by the World Bank to allocate about \$12 billion to assist 100 developing countries to boost their testing, treatment, and vaccination programs is laudable (since it helps to build the basis for reopening African economies), robust debt restructuring and economic and financial assistance will further help African economies to record positive growth indices for long-term political and social stability in the region. Similarly, efforts should be made to support the development of local infectious disease infrastructure, loosening of vaccine patency restrictions, strengthening governing institutions, reversing the slide toward authoritarianism in various parts of the continent, and containing insurgencies and terrorist groups.

Such efforts will not only be central to returning Africa back to a trajectory of growth; they are also critical for saving the democratic gains necessary for the continent's long-term prosperity and stability. While not sufficient in guaranteeing Africa's recovery, increased democratization is nonetheless the only viable insurance policy against authoritarian and illiberal pitfalls that have strangled Africa's potentialities for much of its independence period. ●