



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Responses to Coronavirus Expose Governments' Fault Lines

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,519, April 5, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The failures of the Pakistani and Egyptian responses to the coronavirus crisis demonstrated that neither ultra-conservative science-rejecting worldviews nor self-serving autocratic policies aimed at regime enhancement produced initial prevention and mitigation strategies that could have blunted the impact of the disease.

Pakistan and Egypt, though very different in terms of their responses to coronavirus, are by no means the only countries in the world to botch their handling of the onset of the crisis. Overwhelmingly, governments across the globe—with the exceptions of Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea—failed to take the early warning signs seriously.

Unlike western democracies, which themselves have little to boast about in their handling of the crisis, countries like Pakistan and Egypt lack checks and balances, robust civil societies, and independent media, and they have both gone out of their way to keep it that way.

Egypt, apparently taking a leaf out of China's playbook, reprimanded foreign correspondents from *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* in Cairo for reporting that the number of cases in the country was exponentially higher than the 495 confirmed by authorities as of March 29.

The coverage was based on conclusions by infectious disease specialists at the University of Toronto who had analyzed flight and traveler data as well as infection rates.

The [scientists](#) estimated that "Egypt likely has a large burden of Covid-2019 [coronavirus] cases that are unreported." They put the number of Egyptian cases as high as 19,130 as of March 15.

In response, authorities withdrew the press permit of *The Guardian's* Ruth Michaelson and expelled her from the country while *The New York Times's* Declan Walsh was forced to delete a tweet. Several Egyptians have also been detained on charges of spreading false rumors.

Egypt did impose strict measures, including the closure of all educational institutions and the suspension of flights, on March 15, the day the scientists published their findings. The government also announced a \$6.38 billion fund to fight the virus.

A World Health Organization (WHO) official in Cairo [said](#) the group could not verify the scientists' methodology but added that "it is possible that there are many other cases with mild symptoms which did not result in hospital visits, and therefore are not detected or reported."

Independent reporting is a crucial node in an effective early warning system. It creates pressure for a timely response. The effort to suppress it was in line with Egyptian general-turned-president Abdel Fattah Sisi's initial reaction to the virus.

Rather than focusing on early preventive measures at home, Sisi sought to benefit from China's predicament.

With only one officially confirmed case of a Chinese national arriving in February at Cairo Airport, an individual who was hospitalized and who recovered, Sisi sent his health minister, Hala Zayed, to China to praise it for preventing a far worse global outbreak by taking very strong precautionary measures. This was done despite Beijing's costly failure to confront the disease firmly from the outset.

Pakistan's approach in recent months was no less negligent than that of Egypt.

Like Egypt, a country in which the power of the military is thinly camouflaged by hollowed-out institutions, Pakistan waffled until last week in its response to the pandemic.

In a bid to earn brownie points in Beijing, the Pakistani government refused early on to evacuate some 800 students from Wuhan. It also failed to manage the return of potentially infected pilgrims from Iran. And finally, it catered to ultra-conservative groups.

As a result, Pakistan, a deeply religious country that borders on both China and Iran, allowed Tablighi Jamaat, a proselytizing group with a huge global following in some 80 countries that is banned in Saudi Arabia, to continue organizing mass events.

The group organized a 16,000-person mass gathering in early March in Malaysia where scores were infected with the coronavirus.

Hundreds of Tablighi gathered from March 21 to 23 in the Mardan District of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province to pray, listen to speeches, and eat and sleep in congested quarters.

One participant, professing his belief that God would protect the Tablighi, described spending almost six weeks together with thousands of others at Tablighi headquarters near Lahore, a city of 11 million, just before traveling to Mardan.

Pakistan Religious Affairs Minister Noor-ul-Haq Qadri caved in to demands by the clergy to keep mosques open but capped the maximum number of people at prayers at five.

The minister's concession reinforced a popular perception that the Pakistani government viewed the virus crisis as less grave than what was being projected by health authorities across the globe.

"If the pandemic was serious, the government would've shut down all the mosques," [said](#) Sadiq Bhutt, speaking through an interpreter, as he entered a mosque in Islamabad for Friday prayers.

Ultimately, the Pakistan military overrode government policy and intervened to impose a lockdown like that which is being conducted by much of the rest of the world.

But as in Egypt it may be too late for Pakistan, which is both the world's most populous Muslim nation (207 million) and ill-equipped for a pandemic.

Ultimately, the lesson of Egypt's, Pakistan's, and China's initial handling of coronavirus is that neither self-serving autocrats nor authoritarians have the wherewithal to confront a crisis like a pandemic in a timely fashion. Their much-delayed responses failed to take the public's interests to heart, focusing instead on the interests of elites that prioritize geopolitical or political advantage.

Western democracies have not performed much better, with President Donald Trump seemingly more concerned about economic impact in an election year than about public health and people's lives.

The difference is that western democracies have the ability to hold leaders to account and implement lessons learned from the costly mismanagement of the coronavirus pandemic.

It's hard to hold out a similar hope for Arab autocracies or countries like Pakistan whose democratic façade is at best skin deep.

Dr. James M. Dorsey, a non-resident Senior Associate at the BESA Center, is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore's Nanyang

Technological University and co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture.