

Politics and the Science of COVID-19; Global Lessons

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Politics is essentially about who gets what, when, and how. It involves realization of power relations and activities for impartial welfare of a populace. The varied human appeals invariably demand that politicians or institution advocate for means that meet physical and related needs of the public. Science is distinctly about experiential truths and how these truths distress human lives. It is broadly an intellectual activity about the systematic study of the structure and behavior of the corporeal and the natural world through observation and experiment leading to uncovering germane truths. The correlation between the dual disciplines is consequently symbiotic and relates to the welfare of the populace. This relationship is deepened in times of calamities as well as in times of natural disasters like medical tragedies, famine, draught, and social obliteration. While politics seeks to ameliorate such crisis by seeking short-term remedies for partisan contentment or as long as politicians have power, science demands caution and empirical truths regarding the causes for such misfortunes and proposes scientific solutions to the crisis. These scientific veracities are timeless, meant to provide remedies to such emerging calamities. The contemporary case of COVID-19 has validated how these two fields have either complemented or controverted each other occasioning weighty apprehensions regarding human lives around the globe. This paper is descriptive in nature and seeks to isolate the global lessons learnt since COVID-19 as politics encounters science. It has relied on obtainable and emerging literature regarding the subject.

Keywords: politics, science, COVID-19, America, Europe, Asia and Africa

Background

The severe acute respiratory syndrome, coronavirus, also known as COVID-19 pandemic, is a continuing pandemic that was first identified in Wuhan-China in December 2019. The World Health Organization affirmed the outbreak as a public health emergency in January 2020 (WHO, 2020a). Since then, the pandemic has been reported in more than 188 countries and territories with more than over 800,000 fatalities. The pandemic is credited for global social and economic disruption since the great depression (IMF Blog, 2020). Sporting, religious, and cultural events have been cancelled with health protocols generally in place to combat the pandemic. While political events have also been postponed indefinitely, political leaders have ordinarily determined how the disease has been contained across the globe. The disease has affected various countries differently depending on diverse political goodwill or otherwise; this paper presents a global snapshot COVID-19 as it continues to spread unabated momentous political undercurrents.

United States of America

President Donald Trump offers a relevant case on the subject of this paper. As early as February 2020, President Trump repudiated the spread of the novel COVID-19 pandemic and its immense social and economic impact. He erroneously claimed that the virus was a Chinese flu in transit that will be managed in good time with the intention of appealing to his political base. He escalated his argument with the contention that the flu can be managed with hydroxychloroquine drug, a drug intended to treat Lupus, Malaria as well Rheumatoid Arthritis. Later, he promoted the use of convalescent plasma to treat the virus without enough scientific data to support his assertions. He has even thrown caution to the wind dismissing the opinion of top American scientists such as Dr. Anthony Fauci. Dr. Fauci is a highly considered American physician and immunologist who has consistently opined that the drug and other alleged therapies being promoted by the President are not effective in treating COVID-19. These therapies are known to result in fatal heart and other health complications. Since then, the president has discounted medical protocols to counter the spread of the virus. He has been reported and seen not wear face masks in public except for a few photo opportunities. He has gone ahead to organize political rallies in anticipation of 2020 American elections oblivious of medical protocols to keep the virus at bay. His care free attitudes towards these medical protocols have contributed to over 180,000 (WHO, 2020b) fatalities with the figures continuing to soar by the time of putting together this paper. In the meantime, a debate lingers in the USA regarding safe reopening of schools. Politicians allied to President Trump want schools and other institutions to reopened as soon as possible with few or uncoordinated guidelines from the federal government. They claim that children are less susceptible to contracting the virus despite enormous scientific counsel.

South America

The case of politics meeting science is epitomized in Brazil by President Jair Bolsonaro. The lack of political leadership saw country report over three million cases of COVID 19 and 90,000 (WHO, 2020c) fatalities by July, 2020. This was the second highest confirmed cases behind the United States of America. President Bolsonaro appeared to have taken a cue from his American counterpart by disregarding all health protocols and meeting his political supporters regularly without observing medical conventions. Regrettably, he contracted COVID-19 in early July 2020 and resulted to self-medication using hydroxychloroquine drug despite advice from the health experts that the drug is not effective. His current health condition is not known. This pandemic has taken its toll on Brazilians with their economy slowly grinding to a near halt.

Asia

Australia is an exceptional example of how parts of this region are dealing with the pandemic. Although the country has witnessed resurges of the disease, politics has positively embraced science and ensured minimal casualties from the disease. The political leadership led by Scott Morrison has moved quickly to stem the pandemic in cities where COVID-19 has a resurged such as Melbourne by imposing strict lockdown protocols such as wearing of masks in public spaces, maintaining appropriate hygiene, and keeping social distance. To demonstrate how the political leadership is considerate regarding the pandemic, a total lockdown in cities witnessing resurgence was immediately effected. Families have been locked down in homes while only allowing selected people in families a couple of days in a week to get out to stock up on groceries. Nevertheless, Australia

(WHO, 2020d) has succeeded at keeping COVID-19 very low with 25,000 and 663 cases of fatalities recounted in the country. In Russia Vladimir Putin recently unveiled a vaccine named after Sputnik V after the first Soviet satellite that was launched in 1957. The vaccine developed by the Gamaleya Institute in Moscow was approved after less than two months of human testing skipping other crucial trials thus sparking a worldwide polemic. Few Russians have since volunteered to take the vaccine with a teachers' union advising its members to boycott the vaccine until its safety is proven. However, this situation may soon change in Russia and everybody ultimately compels to take the vaccine. Other countries such as the Philippines and Venezuela (BBC News, 2020a) have requested their citizenry to register as volunteers to test the COVID-19 vaccine developed in Russia. In the meantime, the Russian health minister announced that doctors and teachers will be the first to be immunized. As at September 2020 the number of infections in Russia has increased by over 4,952 with a total of 1,005,000 (WHO, 2020e) infections according to the health ministry. It would seem that the rush by Russia to unveil a vaccine was politically motivated and had not had any recorded impact; thus far as infection numbers have continued to surge.

Africa

Tanzania and Rwanda are strategic African nations with diametrically opposite schemes on combating the pandemic. At the onset of the pandemic, President Paul Kagame of Rwanda immediately instituted strict measures to combat the virus. He immediately instituted systematic containment measures that included interventions such as strict enforcement of lockdown rules in the country's neighborhoods, meticulous contact tracing, and scaled up testing. The citizenry immediately embraced the health protocols. These measures ensured that the country emerged as a model of containing COVID-19 in the region. The country has only recorded three (WHO, 2020f) deaths by the time of writing this paper. It recently reported that it had reopened its airspace for international flights. These efforts earned the country significant commendation by the European Union while the Germany Robert Koch (2020) institute declared the country, "no longer a COVID-19 risk area". Conversely reports by the BBC (BBC News, 2020b) in Africa have documented the opaqueness with which President John Pombe Magufuli's government has responded the pandemic in Tanzania. The President has repeatedly intimated that the pandemic has been largely defeated in Tanzania even with lack of scientific data to support his claims. He has opened up religious, social, and even political activities in the country in the run up the Presidential elections in the country. This state has led to regional anxieties regarding the true level of infections in the country. Health workers have been afraid to speak out on the level of the crisis in the country. Amnesty International (2020) attributes this opaqueness to tyrannical laws against laws on freedom of expression and the press in the country. The last detailed report was in April 2020 which recorded 480 cases and 21 deaths (WHO, 2020g). Since then, government officials have issued little or no data on COVID-19, a fact that has made it difficult to draw comparisons of situation in the country and region. In May 2020, the US embassy in Tanzania issued an alert warning that hospitals in the country had been overwhelmed by the pandemic. President Magufuli's government dismissed the alert and summoned the US envoy. The president has continued to attribute the "successful" containment of the disease in Tanzania to their undivided faith in God. The case in Tanzania has recently led to regional concerns. Several regional trade routes to Tanzania have been heavily disrupted owing to COVID-19. This state of affairs has even affected other landlocked countries such as Zambia and Rwanda.

Europe

Tiny Denmark, Scandinavian country with a population of roughly 5.8 people, has confidently battled the COVID-19 pandemic and a recorded very low rate of infection and death compared to other European countries. The Danish success story regarding the pandemic is attributed to a combination of swift responses by the government and the people. The government led by the Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen immediately instituted containment measures. Further, the Danish culture of thoughtfulness, strong sense of social responsibility to the community, trust, and a high level of confidence in the government's initiatives led to significant suppression of the virus and a gradual reopening of its society (Olagina & Mogensen, 2020). The initial rapid lockdown by the Danish government was crucial at limiting the viral spread. This drastic approach greatly differed from its neighbors such as Italy who were immensely affected by the spread of the virus. Denmark banned large public gatherings, discouraged the use of public transportations, and instructed the closure of daycares, schools, and universities while travel by air was immediately prudently controlled. Additionally, the comprehensive, accessible, and free public health care system immeasurably contributed to the country's virus containment measures. The Danish accomplishment story is additionally augmented by the trust that the public has on its political leaders. When the political leaders led by the Prime Minister and the Monarchy initially provided guidelines to combat the virus, the Danish people immediately acknowledged to this health call. The opposite of this situation in Denmark can be witnessed in France where the government health protocols were blatantly disregarded as families mingled generously with friends in public spaces thus encouraging the spread of COVID-19 (Olagina & Mogensen, 2020).

Conclusion, Global Lessons Learnt Since COVID-19

The nexus between politics and science may either result in prosperity or anxiety to the people. This paper has established that where politics has heeded scientific counsel, the people's level of distress has been significantly reduced. Conversely, where politics has repudiated emerging scientific reality regarding COVID-19, the results have been catastrophic. The cataclysm has been witnessed in plummeting economies, massive job cuts, disabled education systems, and interrupted social and political activities around the world. This paper therefore documents the following four key lessons learnt since COVID-19:

1. Political leaders must embrace scientific truths in order to respond effectively to pandemics.
2. Politician must be timely, forthright, and decisive at instituting measures to combat pandemics.
3. A people's sense of social responsibility to the community, culture, trust and a high level of confidence in the government's containment initiatives constitute necessary ingredients for suppressing pandemics.
4. A free, public and comprehensive health care system is noteworthy in the suppression and elimination of a pandemic and a gradual reopening of society.

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