

Towards Africa:

The Political Economy of Corona Pandemic and Africa



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The International Order and the Corona Pandemic

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Popular Support

The majority of the population are young
people and a few homes for the elderly

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Introduction

2 The corona pandemic crisis has left a clear recession at the level of the international order, as a result of its widespread, starting from China and to various parts of the world. This situation has produced crisis at various levels that the world has not witnessed since World War II due to its repercussions on global stability. The crisis also showed the weakness of joint action, as well as the role of major global and regional blocs that were not up to the challenge, i.e., the global health crisis.

The International Order and the Corona Pandemic

The corona pandemic has forced all countries to rethink the structure of the international order and to consider the balance of power on which it is based. There is no doubt that the pandemic is a major crisis that has cast its shadows on several levels, whether it is the health, economic, commercial, social, political, or even military level.

The corona pandemic caused a major recession at the level of the global economy, and the economic system witnessed a major shock as a result of the collapse of supply chains in light of the increasing global demand. In addition to the lack of alternatives for some industries that witnessed great demand in particular in some basic sectors such as the medical sector. This has created a kind of a global state of instability as well as imbalance at the level of countries' needs, which led to the emergence of some transformations at the level of major economies.

The crisis also forced a reconsideration of the composition of the global economy, which seemed interconnected before the emergence of the pandemic, as globalization not only allowed the rapid spread of infectious diseases, but also strengthened the deep interdependence between companies and countries, making them more vulnerable to unexpected shocks.

Some believe that the system of globalization is here to stay and that the emergence of transnational challenges such as epidemics and environmental disasters will require globally coordinated responses. While some are inclined to argue that the evolving world order will show more intense geopolitical rivalries between the great powers; most notably between the United States and China, and that the degree of interdependence as well as the intensity of interactions among world countries is so high that going back to the pre-globalization era is almost impossible.

Others believe that globalization will slow down around the world, but it will change the trends at the regional levels, casing the separation between the American and Chinese economies will increase, but in return, China in particular will increase its efforts to lead globalization towards regionalism, as the pandemic showed the importance of regional globalization, as we witnessed the leading countries in various regional locations have established regional supply chains under their leadership which is more vital to protecting their national interests than ever before.

Hence, the international and regional institutions have failed to accommodate the new threats to international peace and security and have demonstrated their inability to mobilize international efforts to develop a strategic plan to confront this danger, as their role has been limited to presenting some small initiatives with limited horizons, as well as remaining under blackmail by funders and donors.



Therefore, the corona pandemic created a fertile ground for the reform of international and regional multilateral institutions in order to make them more efficient and responsive to sudden international crisis.

Scenarios of the African Continent

Perhaps the biggest question that preoccupies the minds of international relations theorists is whether the new coronavirus is able to reshape the international order. Some have argued that the belated US response to the pandemic and its self-sufficiency under Trump's "America First" policy has given China, after its success in reducing the risks of the virus and helping others, an opportunity to prove its worth at the international level. However, it is probably too early to assume the possibility of a fundamental shift in global power relations in favor of China. In any case, three main scenarios can be envisaged that will have an impact on Africa's place in the international order.

First Scenario:

4 The ability of major economies to recover will take longer than expected. The US and China may return to the blame game (President Biden's decision to probe into Covid-19 origin). The US president is also trying to obtain more concessions from China. In this direction, the European Union may move towards division with the emergence of the national spirit and the retreat of the forces supporting the currents of globalization. With the slowdown in global economic growth, poverty and unemployment intensify, especially in developing countries. This creates a possibility of open conflict between the United States and both China and Russia.

It is no secret that the chaos of the international order may enhance the possibilities of a catastrophic African scenario, where direct trade links between Africa and Asia, Europe and the United States are negatively affected, and tourism revenues, African expatriate remittances, foreign direct investment flows, and official development assistance are also declining. In addition, the decline in international oil prices will greatly affect the returns of the producing African countries, such as Angola and Nigeria. It is expected that the imbalance of power at the international level will contribute to an increase in the frequency of conflicts and civil wars witnessed by the failing countries in Africa, and thus many of them shall fall prey to external interventions.

Second Scenario:

The Chinese leadership may believe that there is an opportunity to undermine the credibility of Western liberal democracy by expanding the development aid program, with more concessional loans, and more infrastructure projects; consequently, expanding the Belt and Road Initiative to more countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, thus giving Beijing ownership of critical infrastructure in more countries. African leaders have studied and learned from East Asia's economic success stories; they learned that it is fair trade, not aid, which spurs economic growth. It suffices to point out that when China holds the China-African summit meetings, the entire African leaders attend without exception.

Third Scenario:

The speed of the global economic recovery, including the lifting of border closures, and the easing of tariffs and other trade barriers, could prompt a cooperative reconfiguration of the international order. There are widespread calls for all governments to adopt the reform approach. A world warning agency may be established on diseases, conflicts and climate, which makes the environmental aspect of globalization the most prominent in the post-Corona world. There is no doubt that China's membership in such an international mechanism makes it a dependable global power and eases the American differences with it. It is also expected to improve US relations with Europe under the leadership of President Biden. This multilateral path advances the cooperation of the United States, the European Union, China and other countries, as they share common interests in combating climate change and future health crises.



As this world will remain multipolar, African countries can exploit this to become a preferred destination for investment, and a lucrative place for economic opportunities. This may enhance its bargaining power in the field of exploiting its natural resources. In such a case, it is expected that sustainable development programs across the continent will seek to transform the resource curse into a driver of a new African renaissance. Then Africa may emerge as an economic bloc closely linked to the course of interactions that make up a multipolar global environment. Perhaps the institutional reforms of the African Union will succeed in adopting a pattern of continental responses with the aim of taking advantage of new opportunities and promoting unity and development across the continent. However, Africa will not operate in a vacuum; its countries must be willing and able to transform with the changing tide. This transformation must be based on a conscious and effective leadership, away from traditional ways of thinking.

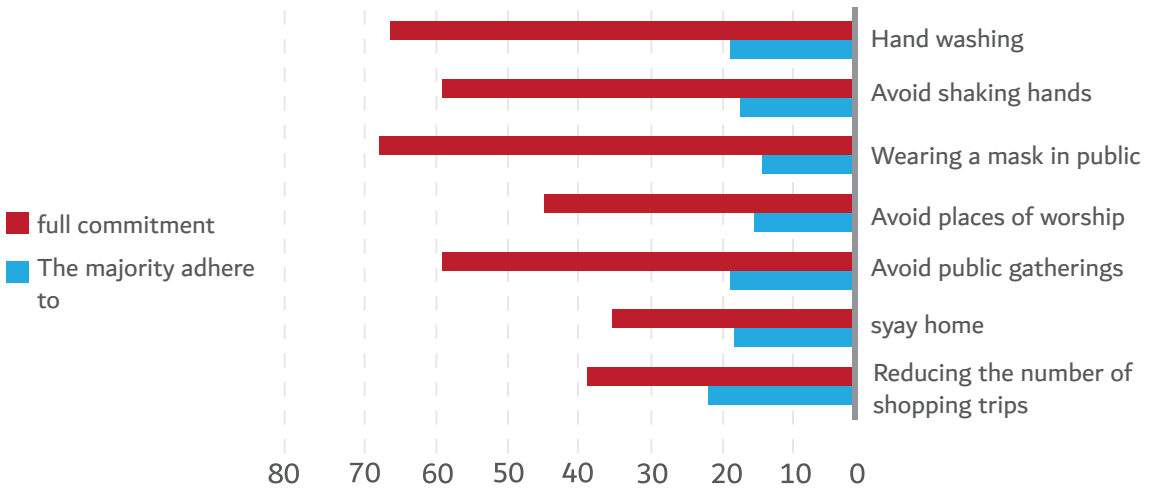
The Corona Pandemic and Africa

6 To clarify the impact of all of the above on Africa's ability to confront the Corona pandemic, we should refer to few years ago when the Ebola virus devastated some West African countries, especially Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone. The United States, China and the European Union provided a helping hand to those countries. Today, when everyone is equal in this devastating pandemic, African countries have stood almost alone in the face of it, as they are fighting this deadly virus with their own limited capabilities and little external support.

The approach of the current crisis in comparison to previous crisis that the world has witnessed previously; shows that the Corona virus constitutes a crisis that exceeds its health and economic dimensions, which leads to a state of instability and uncertainty. The response patterns of major countries in the international order to the pandemic may be a key indicator of a new world that is taking shape.

It should be noted here that during the global financial crisis in 2008, there were several discussions on the decline of the West, the rise of what can be referred to as emerging economies and the trend towards Asia. Accordingly, it may be useful to benefit from the writings of many intellectuals who have warned against the decline in the role of West, especially the USA, at the global level.

The extent of compliance with the instructions of Covid-19



Figures are from a telephone survey of more than 24,000 adults conducted between 4 and 5 August 2020

There is a catastrophic scenario for the African situation that appears on the horizon in the short and medium term, resulting from this global crisis. Based on the lowest expectations of the Economic Commission for Africa, and if the virus continues to spread at its current rate, the number of infections in Africa will reach a minimum of 7.6 million confirmed cases in the coming years.

However, these estimates remain somehow inaccurate and unrealistic because the current death rate in Africa is very low compared to the rest of the world for the following reasons:

First: Rapid Actions

The first case of infection on the African continent was confirmed in Egypt on February 14, 2020, and there were fears that the outbreak of the emerging virus would quickly overwhelm the largely fragile health systems in Africa and could not contain it. But on the contrary, most African governments, from the beginning, have taken strict measures to try to slow the spread of the virus, and have followed public health recommendations regarding combating the virus, including avoiding hand shaking, washing hands frequently, social distancing and wearing masks.

In this regard, some countries such as Lesotho have taken such measures even before a single case was reported, declaring a state of emergency and closing schools on March 18 of the same year, and imposing a three-week general closure after about 10 days, as well as many other South African

countries. However, just days after the lockdown was lifted in early May, Lesotho detected its first confirmed cases.

Second: Popular Support

The implementation of the strict restrictions has cost these countries dearly, with livelihoods lost on a large scale, and the loss of 2.2 million jobs during the first half of 2020 in South Africa (which has experienced one of the most stringent closings in the world).

More African countries have been forced to reopen their economies, although the number of cases is much higher than when they ordered the closure. According to some observers, the public response to reopening the economy has been a mixture of support and opposition.

People began calling for reopening, in light of the increasing hardship of living, after they believed that the risk of infection with Covid-19 would be minimal if the rules of social separation were followed. But the majority of the population in Africa is starting to feel anxious when resuming normal activities, which shows how much they support the measures taken by their governments, knowing that people across the African Union consider this epidemic a serious threat.

Third: The majority of the population are young people and a few homes for the elderly

The age of the population of most African countries may have played a significant role in containing the spread of the pandemic as well. Globally, most of those who died were over 80 years old, while Africa is a young continent compared to the rest of the world.

The World Health Organization stated that: “The pandemic has spread to a large extent among the younger age groups; as about 91% of cases in sub-Saharan African countries spread only among people under the age of 60 years, and 80% of them did not show symptoms.

“In Africa we have about 3% of the population over the age of 65 compared to the populations of Europe, North America and the richer Asian countries that have the largest proportion of elderly people,” stated the WHO Regional Director for Africa. He added: “One of the main factors behind this is that in Western countries, the elderly were living in designated homes which became places of high transmission.” Such homes are rare in most African countries, and for the most part, the elderly live in rural areas. It is normal in

many African countries for people in urban areas to return after retirement age to live in their rural homes. Also, the population density in rural areas is low, so it is much easier to maintain social distance. Furthermore, the primitive transportation system within and between these countries seemed to be a hidden blessing; i.e. the Africans do not travel as much as people in economically developed countries, which reduces personal contact.

Fourth: Adequate Climate

A study conducted by researchers at the University of Maryland in the United States found a relationship between temperature, humidity and latitude and the spread of the Corona pandemic, and they confirmed in a study they conducted for fifty cities around the world that the spread of the virus was easier in places with low temperatures and humidity. This does not mean that the virus does not spread in other conditions, but it spreads better when the temperature and humidity decrease. African countries far from the tropics fared worse, with the virus spreading rapidly in southern Africa as the southern hemisphere entered winter.

However, with the rise of the temperature, the number of cases dropped dramatically, affecting the continental outlook, with South Africa accounting for nearly half of the continent's total cases and deaths.

Fifth: Good Public Health Measures

Many of the West African countries that battled the world's worst Ebola outbreak ever in the period from (2013 to 2016) mastered the public health measures that were later used to prevent the new coronavirus, including isolating infected people, tracing their contacts, and then subjecting them to quarantine while they wait for their test results. Moreover, some African countries were quick to redesign the teams that were going to the villages to immunize children with polio vaccine and to educate communities about the Corona pandemic. Therefore, the strength of the African continent lies in its tried and tested community health measures, although hospital infrastructure in most parts of Africa is less developed than in other parts of the world.

The governments of African countries must take more precautions and implement the necessary measures to confront the pandemic in a stricter manner, due to the lack of modern medical equipment and the lack of manufacturing bases in order to confront and contain the virus. Most African countries are facing severe shortages of hospital beds and respirators, as well

as medical materials needed to fight the pandemic. If the pandemic spreads in Africa, the dilemma of choosing will be between death from infection or death from starvation.

According to this disastrous scenario, Africa will be in a difficult situation. In the event that the crisis continues globally and the access to a treatment or vaccine is delayed, it could turn into a deep economic crisis at the African level. However, African countries will strive to contain the repercussions of the global recession, and will use their limited financial capabilities to meet urgent health needs, support their production systems and protect jobs, amid high rates of poverty and a lack of social safety nets.

Conclusions

Perhaps the biggest lesson Africa must learn from the COVID-19 Pandemic is the virtue of self-reliance for survival. For example, if a vaccine is discovered to control the virus in economically advanced countries, African countries will not receive it until after those countries meet their needs. Western countries may not be as bold as US President Donald Trump when he said “America First,” but in reality they should implement the same policy. African leaders should not attack “Trump” or the West for its failure to provide assistance, but instead should advance their economies and rely on themselves.

Forty African countries have introduced a large package of different policies and mechanisms to support the economy and the poor and marginalized segments of the population; including tax exemptions for the various key sectors, and targeted cash transfers to the poor and marginalized. The ten “best performers” among African countries are also implementing particularly comprehensive or innovative policies and measures that deserve to be taught to other countries in Africa and around the world. These measures include: establishing markets in open spaces that observe social distancing for sellers in the informal sector (Kenya), comprehensive exemption from water and other utilities bills for all for a period of two or three months (Niger and Ghana), and providing cash subsidies to the poor (Botswana).

Some African countries have resorted to technology to confront the economic and health crisis, and digital solutions have been adopted for performing business in the banking, education and communication sectors with the outside world. Zoom and Microsoft Team applications have become the most prominent search terms on the Google platform in African countries. West African governments have also eliminated some account opening fees

and mobile money transfers. Some African countries such as Senegal have introduced online learning platforms, and many African universities have provided technical data packages to students. Rwanda has also deployed drones to distribute medicines and deliver public service announcements. However, it is confirmed that the Corona pandemic will stimulate African countries to innovate and use new and previously unfamiliar means in order to overcome their challenges.

About b'huth

b'huth is an independent public policy research Centre founded in Dubai, UAE in 2002, that focuses on International Affairs, Geostrategic Affairs, Public Policy Studies and Public Opinion Research. We bring together experts in all these areas to work with us, to learn from one another and to foster creative thinking. Our scholars & Analysts develop practical policy recommendations and offer them to policymakers and stakeholders for political and social improvement as we strive to always bring forward «actionable knowledge». Quite often, b'huth is involved in implementing this recommendation.

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