



# Fair Observer

Monthly

April 2020

Fair Observer<sup>o</sup>

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# Fair Observer Monthly



April 2020

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# ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

Fair Observer is a nonprofit media organization that engages in citizen journalism and civic education.

Our digital media platform has more than 2,000 contributors from nearly 90 countries, cutting across borders, backgrounds and beliefs. With fact-checking and a rigorous editorial process, we provide diversity and quality in an era of echo chambers and fake news.

Our education arm runs training programs on subjects such as digital media, writing and more. In particular, we inspire young people around the world to be more engaged citizens and to participate in a global discourse.

As a nonprofit, we are free from owners and advertisers. When there are six jobs in public relations for every job in journalism, we rely on your donations to achieve our mission.

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## **Anne Frank's Amsterdam: Remembering Our Privilege in Times of Pandemic**

Colleen Boland  
April 3, 2020

**Remembering Anne Frank amid the coronavirus pandemic can teach us a valuable lesson in humanity.**

**A**s I reread Anne Frank's diary — living just a 10-minute walk from her hiding place in Amsterdam and having first read it in an American middle school, only imagining Europe — I immediately recognize many things that were not familiar the first time around.

In recounting her life before going into hiding, she describes her birthday and how her second present included various flowers and a plant — flowers are a budget-friendly staple in homes here in the Netherlands to brighten the dreary days. Her bike was stolen, also still a common occurrence; I am part of that unfortunate club. I noticed I had been out to socialize in the neighborhood where she took the ferry, now a hipster hangout with poké restaurants and candlelit beer gardens.

Even as she progresses to describe the house containing her hiding place, it is all very recognizable: Having evolved from a mixed 16th-century warehouse and living space, the description of the “typically Dutch, very steep, ankle-twisting flight of stairs” resembles the staircase I had lugged eight suitcases up when moving here a year ago. My apartment, a few canals over in a similar 16th-century building in the picturesque neighborhood of Nine Streets, is about twice the size of the space she shared with eight people in the secret annex on Prinsengracht. I hear the same chime from the Westerkerk tower that she enjoyed.

The Netherlands has adopted several measures to cope with the COVID-19 outbreak, but has not gone into full lockdown like other European

countries, including Italy and my adopted country, Spain, where some of my family and friends are quarantined in Madrid. However, despite extraordinary restrictions here, I enjoy a completely different level of freedom than Jewish people did in this very same place, as Anne Frank describes how events began to unfold in May 1941.

I go jogging when they were forbidden to take part in any public athletics, I shop for groceries whenever I want, I can still go out on the streets as long as I maintain social distancing. Even as cinemas and shops are closed, they are not closed to me specifically, but to everyone. In Anne's time, there was selective exclusion that morphed into complete annihilation, reaching the point where she hid in fear for her life and the lives of those close to her, which were the only things left to lose.

As social and mainstream media are threaded with hand-wringing and self-pity, as we navigate and self-applaud our feats of adapting in this public health emergency, the concepts of privilege and freedom come to mind. This is not a novel approach. There have been illustrative pictures painted of a “dystopian” reversal of situations where European refugees flee to African shores. We are reminded to consider how toilet paper being out of stock for a few days is nothing compared to the war and famine that others suffer every day. Even in our very own neighborhoods, this crisis is indeed an inconvenience for the privileged but can mean ruin or even death for those less fortunate, including those in precarious work.

Indeed, I am not even beginning to suggest analogies to Anne Frank's tragedy, or the plight of refugees in the Mediterranean, nor would I dare to make light of what fellow European residents in Italy and Spain are going through. Instead, I am starkly reminded of my own privilege, with the opportunity to even live abroad, to worry about economic loss and to be preoccupied with temporary travel bans keeping me from family and friends.

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As an American of Irish-Italian descent having moved to the Netherlands for my Spanish partner's job, I am called an expat or expatriate, a term with a positive or reified connotation. So are my other upper-middle-class professional peers from all over the world working here in Amsterdam. Meanwhile, people of color or from less fortunate socioeconomic backgrounds are called immigrants. And, of course, this is not exclusive to the Netherlands. The elite expat circles around the world highlight the freedom of movement and financial freedom that very few are permitted to enjoy.

This points to a truly insidious encroachment on freedom taking place. Even given recent history, minority populations in our European societies of residence face subtle societal restrictions and institutional depreciation of liberal democratic guarantees. These are not restrictions on all for the common good, but rather on a select group.

One striking parallel — and the object of my research — is the institutional and societal treatment of Muslims in Europe and how it harkens back to the Jewish question. Facing an “othering” and discrimination based on everything from their religious affiliation to ethnicity, migrant background and a myriad other identifications, they are meant to conform to supposedly mainstream and “secular” societal standards in order to belong, to “integrate” into a uniform model of citizenship that is arguably continuously evolving in diverse European societies.

They face restrictions on dress, access to the labor market, individual expression and promised freedom of religion, among others, and are the constant subject of controversial debate and scapegoating during election cycles. Slowly and increasingly, there are hints at population control and eugenics.

Amidst times of crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic, humanity comes together — against something. As populism rises in Europe and racist and xenophobic discourses (and actions and policy) transform from taboo to commonplace, it

is rather human against human. Earlier on in her confinement, Anne reflected that “Not being able to go outside upsets me more than I can say, and I'm terrified our hiding place will be discovered and that we'll be shot.”

There has to be a middle ground between remembering our privilege and freedom when moved in times of discomfort or crisis, like being upset that we can't go outside, and unconsciously arriving at the point where we completely deprive the freedom of others, like eliminating the “other” thanks to entrenched and arbitrary power differentials. When Anne and her family went into hiding, many Jewish families were still understandably debating the necessity of doing so and remained unaware that it may already have been too late.

In the midst of many other crisis manifestos and calls to action, this argument might be met with the question of what the actionable answer is. I find it difficult to suggest a concrete plan, but the obvious, albeit vague injunction, is to take these reminders and realizations and act upon them seriously and urgently, lest we are forced to confront them at a much more exacerbated and irrecoverable stage.

\***Colleen Boland** is a research manager at the transnational NGO Common Action Forum.

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## Should We All Have Been Wearing Masks From the Start?

Hans-Georg Betz  
April 7, 2020

**What accounts for the reticence on the part of those who should have known better to advise everyone to wear face masks to prevent the spread of coronavirus?**

In recent days, Donald Trump's administration finally appears to have come to grips with the seriousness of the coronavirus crisis threatening to lay waste to the country and, with



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it, his presidency. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has recommended that people cover their faces, using any means at their disposal, when going outside. In a bold move, Trump was said to be close to recommending to his fellow citizens to cover their faces, while at the same time refusing to do so himself. This change of course goes against all the advice which had been promoted online strongly insinuating that wearing face masks was neither necessary nor encouraged.

The advice originated with the World Health Organization (WHO), which until recently had deemed face masks essential only “for health workers and sick people” not, however, for the general public. An article from an Austrian newspaper from late February provided some insight into the rationale behind this recommendation. The headline was paradigmatic: “Why face masks don’t offer protection against infection.” According to “experts,” for healthy people to wear a face mask when out in the streets was “nonsensical.” In fact, the authors of the article claimed, wearing a mask might be counterproductive. It might give the wearer a false sense of security. As a result, he or she might neglect to wash their hands as thoroughly as recommended by the WHO.

In a similar vein, the German center-left weekly *Die Zeit* noted that face masks might look cute, but in an “emergency” they were about as useful as an umbrella in a storm front — completely useless. In France, in mid-March, one of the country’s leading news magazines, *Le nouvel observateur*, cautioned against the use of masks and gloves claiming that wearing them was “not necessarily effective.”

### **Masking the Problem**

In the meantime, there is growing evidence that covering nose and mouth does in fact have benefits, if only to lower the probability or people, especially the young, who show few, if any, symptoms, to pass on the infection to those most vulnerable. A few days ago, in an interview with *Science*, George Gao, director general of the

Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, affirmed that it was a “The big mistake in the U.S. and Europe, in my opinion, is that people aren’t wearing masks. This virus is transmitted by droplets and close contact. Droplets play a very important role — you’ve got to wear a mask, because when you speak, there are always droplets coming out of your mouth. Many people have asymptomatic or presymptomatic infections. If they are wearing face masks, it can prevent droplets that carry the virus from escaping and infecting others.”

In France this Sunday, one of the country’s leading epidemiologists pleaded for a complete reversal of course and follow the Asian example, meaning that everybody wears a mask in public. Against that, in Switzerland, one of the countries with the highest infection rates per million, public authorities continue to insist that wearing masks and gloves is “not effective.”

What, then, accounts for the reticence on the part of those who should have known better to advise everyone to wear face masks? One reason stands out: the utter unpreparedness of most advanced liberal capitalist countries in the face of the crisis. In Switzerland, for instance, one of the most affluent countries in the world, home to some of the most prominent pharmaceutical companies, pharmacies advised customers to take precautions, wash hands and, when in public, use hand sanitizer. There was only one problem: There was no hand sanitizer to be had, neither in the major supermarkets nor in pharmacies. It is only now, after more than four weeks, that one of the country’s major supermarket chains offers hand sanitizer, strictly limited to one per person.

And what about masks? As the Swiss quickly found out, the country’s masks were supplied by Germany, which stopped exports to Switzerland as soon as the crisis hit. In Switzerland, not one company was in a position to produce masks. As a result, three weeks into the lockdown, Switzerland does not have a large enough supply of masks for authorities to recommend that citizens wear them in public.

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The situation was not very much different in the rest of the European Union. With the onset of the crisis, solidarity stopped at national borders. Hard-hit countries, such as Italy, Spain and France, finally had to turn to China to get desperately needed medical supplies — in the face of brutal international “disloyal” competition that some have described as Wild West tactics and a new form of piracy.

### **Maskaphobia**

Given the extent of the crisis, there was a second quite plausible reason for discouraging the public from wearing masks. Since masks were in short, and rapidly diminishing, supply, priority should go to those most in need — doctors and nurses exposed to the virus on a daily basis. In Germany, for instance, the situation was so critical that in late March, public health authorities proposed subjecting used masks in clinics, hospitals and homes for the elderly to high heat in order to decontaminate them so they could be reused several times. The measure was supposed to be valid for a maximum of six months — the time it would take to build up capacity.

An article in *The Guardian* made a similar point: “As medical staff and patients in hospital are the people who benefit most from face masks, encouraging the mass adoption of masks could reduce the supply for the people who need them most.” In the US, the country’s surgeon general, Dr. Jerome Adams, tweeted on February 29: “Seriously people — STOP BUYING MASKS! They are NOT effective in preventing general public from catching #Coronavirus, but if healthcare providers can’t get them to care for sick patients, it puts them and our communities at risk!” This is a perfectly reasonable proposition. It should, however, not be used to divert attention from the main reason we are in this situation: the complete failure of public authorities to anticipate, and prepare for, this crisis.

There is a third reason why even today, following one of the most basic precautionary measures — namely covering one’s mouth and

nose in public — continues not to be followed by everyone. Unlike in Japan and other Asian countries, Europeans and North Americans don’t have a culture conducive to wearing masks, for instance during the flu season. Asian tourists ambulating the streets of Paris, Florence, Barcelona or New York wearing masks are a curiosity for the natives, provoking amusement and the occasional shaking of heads.

When, at the beginning of the current crisis, a prominent Swiss member of parliament entered the assembly hall wearing a mask, she was ordered to leave so as not to cause a disturbance. As the crisis progressed, individuals wearing masks, particularly if they happened to be Asians, became the targets of racist attacks, triggered by “maskaphobia” — a neologism for a fear of masks or, perhaps better, of those who wear them.

To make matters worse, at least in Western Europe over the past decade or so, covering one’s face, if only partially, has come to be associated with Islam. In response, a number of European countries have passed laws prohibiting items such as the niqab or the burqa to be worn in public. Under the circumstances, governments encouraging their citizens to cover their faces in public has posed something of a dilemma — a fact not lost on the Muslim community. As one website noted, it “was indeed surprising to see that in France, where the covering of the face was considered an illegal act, and now they’re forcing their locals to cover their faces.” In fact, the correct word under the circumstances is not “surprising,” but “ironic.” But, as the saying goes, drastic times call for drastic measures, principles be damned.

By now, it is well established that wearing a mask, sophisticated or rudimentary, such as covering the lower parts of the face with a scarf or bandana, does make a difference in slowing down the rate of infection and, thus, flattening the curve. Anything that might make a difference, without being harmful, is better than doing nothing. By now it is equally well established that the vast majority of those infected with the

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virus show few, if any, symptoms. For them, COVID-19 is nothing worse than a bout of the flu. They might not even know that they got infected.

Yet they are contagious, potentially continuing to spread the virus at an exponential rate. Under the circumstances, anything that prevents the propagation of infection should not only be encouraged, but mandated, and enforced with the full force of the law, as they do in Laredo, Texas, where anybody caught without covering the lower parts of their face can be charged with a misdemeanor punishable by a fine of up to \$1,000.

\***Hans-Georg Betz** is an adjunct professor of political science at the University of Zurich.

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## **How the US Government Failed to Prepare for a Pandemic**

Daniel Wagner  
April 9, 2020

**Successive US administrations have failed in unison to adequately prepare for a calamity like COVID-19.**

**T**he response to the COVID-19 crisis by both President Donald Trump and his administration has been abysmal, crafting a narrative that has revealed a warped reality based on a combination of ignorance, delusion, denial and a lack of preparedness.

Trump has displayed utter ignorance, especially in the early days of the outbreak in America, stating in February that there were about 15 cases in the US — the result of a single traveler from China — and that the number of infected individuals would soon dwindle down to zero. Only someone completely divorced from reality would have uttered such a statement. It was then that many Americans truly understood just how ill-prepared he was to navigate the country through the crisis.

Messaging out of the White House has been an absolute disaster, starting with the president and trickling down to the various cabinet members, department heads and other official sources of information at the federal level. Delusion on the president's part, misinformation — whether deliberate or otherwise — from other federal officials, a preoccupation with political correctness, and a predilection to pander to the president's political base had combined to create a muddled, discombobulated mess in response to the coronavirus.

### **No Divine Guidance**

It didn't take long for many of America's governors, mayors and corporate CEOs to realize that they would not be gaining any divine guidance from the Trump administration about what to do in response to the outbreak — or when to do it. While by March most of the nation's governors had issued stay-at-home orders, an astonishing number have still failed to do so, three months after the first cases became apparent in the US. Yet in every case, those lockdown orders have been voluntary, since there is no way to actually enforce them. Unlike in China, the sanctity of governmental decrees is dependent upon citizens' willingness to comply. Fortunately, most Americans understand what is at stake and have stayed at home.

As bad as the government's messaging has been, its level of preparedness for a pandemic has been atrocious. Despite the fact that several prior administrations (from Bush to Obama and through to Trump) had plans in place to address a pandemic or bioterrorism event, based on its response to an actual pandemic, the American government appears to have never contemplated the issue prior to the arrival of COVID-19.

For example, in 2004, George W. Bush had signed into law Project BioShield, to protect Americans against biological, chemical, radiological or nuclear attacks. It had allocated \$5.6 billion over 10 years for countermeasures against anthrax, smallpox and other chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear agents.

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Development of medical countermeasures had been accelerated by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), a national network of regional Centers of Excellence for Biodefense were established, and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) was supposed to make treatments speedily available in emergency situations. Yet the NIH, the FDA, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Health and Human Services and a host of other government agencies failed to communicate, collaborate or respond effectively.

In 2015, government scientists estimated that a severe flu outbreak infecting 20% to 30% of the US population would require at least 1.7 billion N95 respirator masks. In 2006, Congress provided supplemental funds to add 104 million N95 masks and 52 million surgical masks in an effort to prepare for a flu pandemic. However, following the H1N1 influenza outbreak in 2009 under Barack Obama — which triggered a nationwide shortage of masks and caused a two to three-year backlog orders for the N95s — the stockpile distributed about three-quarters of its inventory but failed to rebuild the supply. The US continued to rely on imports of personal protective equipment for much of its needs, as well as an overreliance on overseas production of critical drugs.

Also in 2015, a Bipartisan Commission on Biodefense produced more than 30 recommendations for what the US government should do to become better prepared for biological threats. In 2016, the Commission received a grant of just \$1.3 million from a non-governmental organization to continue its work and, in 2018, \$2.5 million more from the same NGO. It did not receive official US government financial support, and the government failed to follow through on virtually any of the recommendations made by the commission, an indication of the continued lack of focus on the subject.

Shortly after taking office in 2017, Trump disbanded the White House's National Security Council Directorate for Global Health Security

and Biodefense — an important link in the national preparedness chain. In 2018, the Trump administration did commence a National Biodefense Strategy designed to enhance national biodefense capabilities. It established a governance structure composed of federal agencies to collect and assess data on their biodefense activities and identify gaps. But the US Government Accountability Office found that there were no clear or detailed processes for joint decision-making, including how agencies would identify opportunities to leverage resources or who would make and enforce decisions.

It concluded that, in the absence of clearly documented methods for enterprise-wide decision-making, the effort ran the risk of failing to adopt a strategic approach that would meaningfully enhance national defense capabilities.

Contrary to the attempted launch of the strategy, the Trump administration's repeated calls to cut the budgets for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the NIH and other public health agencies made it evident that the ability to respond to pandemics was clearly not going to be a priority. The administration certainly contributed to the deficient American response to the virus, but, in truth, successive American administrations have failed in unison to adequately prepare for such a calamity.

One would presume that the government will do a better job of preparing for future pandemics, but if the actions taken following successive cyberattacks against the US government are any indication, the response is likely to be lackluster and underfunded. It appears that only when the American people demand a meaningful response from their elected representatives will this issue be given the attention, funding and resources it deserves.

\***Daniel Wagner** is the founder and CEO of Country Risk.

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## How Zoom Can Make Videoconferencing More Human-Friendly

William Softky  
April 12, 2020

**The popular video-conferencing platform could be the world's first example of neuro-safe technology.**

The good news about COVID-19 is that being forced into physical social separation and remote interaction is teaching people how precious real life is, and which remote technologies preserve reality best. Of those, videoconferencing has the most potential to do good, or harm, because it merges our highest-bandwidth external senses of sight and sound. The four biggest platforms — Skype, GoToMeeting, Google Hangouts and Zoom — are all tempted more by making money than by connecting human beings. Yet any technology will benefit humans only if it obeys the laws of nature governing how nervous systems interact.

I'm familiar with Zoom, and I believe it might pull this off. From what I've heard, almost uniquely in Silicon Valley, Zoom has a corporate culture, founder and workforce more people-centered than money-centered. So, uniquely, Zoom might be able to avoid the siren-song of giving customers what they say they want and instead give humans what nature says we need. Implementing that principle will require saying "no" to the short-term wishes of both customers and investors, and saying "yes" to nature's long-term plans.

In particular, operating Zoom as a public utility optimally connecting human beings with each other — as opposed to optimally extracting revenue from them — will require principled commitments to audio fidelity, remote resonance, algorithmic neutrality, non-adversarial business models and videoconference etiquette. Lucky for us, Zoom has already started on some of those projects. If this works, people will look forward

to Zoom calls as "special," the way they used to look forward to long-distance phone calls back in the day. And global loneliness might finally, finally decrease.

Zoom is on the right track. Because of global work-from-home and school-from-home rules due to the novel coronavirus, Zoom's user base recently grew twenty-fold, from 10 million to 200 million, most of whom aren't even business customers.

I'm one of them. In the last weeks, I've participated in Zoom-enabled parties, yoga classes and meditations. Serving as a real-time gathering spot makes Zoom the closest to a global social lifeline we have, and the technology best poised to reconnect human nervous systems according to the laws of nature. (This conclusion might seem odd, given that I've spent the last several years stumping for non-screen human connection.)

### **Audio Fidelity: Stereo and Microtime**

The challenge: Humans connect emotionally through unconscious timing signals that can't be noticed, digitized or monetized.

It is beyond question that the human nervous system creates perception and trust from ultra-high-precision interactions (see: Sensory Metrics of Neuromechanical Trust). Likewise, humans' remarkable abilities to hear where a sound came from depends on microsecond sound signals, as do our abilities to read emotional nuance. Those "microtime" signals are why LPs and copper-wire phones create so much better emotional experiences than CDs and digital audio.

These facts create three problems for Zoom. First, Zoom's core brand is not audioconferencing but videoconferencing, so people using Zoom naturally pay more attention to screens than sound, although they should do the opposite because sound is wired deeper into us than screens. Second, computer sound as digitized by cheap built-in microphones is nothing like the sound from a good freestanding microphone. Third, while the sound from a good stereo microphone pair has much higher quality

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than from just one, Zoom’s most recent software release paradoxically makes stereo sound harder to use. I hope that decision is reversed soon because audio connection synchronizes people better than video and stereo synchronizes better than monoaural.

My back-of-the-envelope calculations suggest that the single improvement of using stereo microphones, all on its own, would increase human re-synchronization at least tenfold, merely due to better audio signal quality. That solution is available to anyone for about \$20. There is one other semi-secret sauce solution — a proprietary analog circuit that approximately reconstitutes the microtime structure of the original source, even after that structure has been erased by digitization.

I have been experimenting with one such circuit courtesy of the patent owners (US 7,564,982). Most simply, this circuit measures the left-right channel microtime difference, amplifies it and re-inserts it into the headphones or speaker pair. To me, it sounds like the source is a living breathing person nearby, as if whispering next to me in the dark. That personal experience, along with biophysical understanding, tells me that such microtime amplification could improve remote connection dramatically.

### **Algorithmic Transparency**

The challenges: Enhanced self-presentation undermines communication, while eliminating tracking improves communication.

The baseline protocol for human communication was burned into our nervous systems way back in paleo times, before clothes and words. Everyone could see every inch of your body and hear your every grunt, and you couldn’t do anything to stop it. Contrast that case of “too much information” with Apple’s technology called “Facetime effects,” the image-processing trickery providing extraordinarily unnatural control over users’ appearance, all the way to replacing oneself with a boring but attractive cartoon avatar.

The problem is that if everyone gets to hide parts of themselves, then no one gets any honest information, and authenticity degrades into mere performance, absent genuine signals. Cartoon communication isn’t human communication, even if it’s what each separate individual might like to do.

There was no privacy in paleo times, but also no recording and tracking. Paleo people didn’t even have words or cave paintings to record anything, much less up-to-the-millisecond biometric data including your gaze, heartbeat, skin temperature and anxiety level. Humans communicate most naturally, and trustingly, when they know they are not being recorded. Zoom has already been in trouble over privacy concerns, and it has responded by disabling invisible data-tracking and attention-tracking technologies.

On the visible user interface, Zoom is doing two things right and one wrong. On self-photoshopping, for example, Zoom allows only modest airbrush-like “touch up” effects, powerful enough to let someone feel comfortable enough, in close-up videos under bright lights, not to worry about makeup. Minor algorithmic makeup makes real facial expressions easier for everyone to see, so it’s just the right amount. But self-photoshopping could go too far, for example, if customers were offered a powerful “attractive and engaged” appearance via paid algorithmic trickery. (Once a platform starts monetizing fakery, it’s game over for an ecosystem of authentic communication).

Zoom users can also airbrush their backgrounds, using a virtual green-screen to block views of messy kitchens. That means you don’t need to clean up the house before your call, which is also just the right amount of user-control. Unfortunately, Zoom allows users to replace messy kitchens with moving backgrounds, such as flames, which on the Zoom interface distract horribly from the grid of tiny, barely-visible human faces (in front of the flames) that I’m trying to look at. Gratuitous moving backgrounds are a perfect example of

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how a legitimate preference of one user undermines communication for everyone.

### **Remote Resonance**

The challenge: Unlike “presentations” (such as webinars) in which one person talks and everyone else listens, human social resonance requires all-to-all transmission of subconscious signals.

Zoom’s current platform is designed for broadcast. When one person speaks, that sound stream is automatically selected for everyone to hear, while all other microphones are automatically muted. That’s the perfect solution for one-way communications.

But humans are two-way because we resonate. Or at least we try to. On my Zoom-enabled “group meditation,” I attempted to lead a minute’s worth of what primatologists call co-vocalizing, or what yoga people call “OM-ing.” I would chant a long vowel like “ahhh... ohhh... mmmm,” and in principle the others would hum along. But it didn’t work. First, I couldn’t hear them because, of course, their microphones had been turned off while I was humming the sound.

But, weirdly, they couldn’t hear me either. It turns out that Zoom’s audio algorithm only detected a long, boring hum from my own microphone, decided the hum was background noise and then canceled it. So, my fellow meditators saw me with eyes closed and open mouth, yet they heard nothing. My own humming sound had been automatically erased. So much for interpersonal resonance.

A solution promoting resonance would be for Zoom to include a “resonance mode,” in which everyone’s microphone is on just a little bit, with no single sound stream dominating. The exact opposite of the current default, and for the exact opposite purpose: for unifying and synchronizing vibrations instead of separating spoken words.

I am collaborating with one team dedicated to human sonic resonance, the people running the Integratron “sound bath” center in the California desert. We are hoping to find ways to link resonant experiences like their sound baths

remotely using stereo audio, Zoom and the microtime amplifier circuit.

### **A Non-Adversarial Business Model**

The challenge: When carriers like Zoom pay for variable bandwidth but collect fixed subscription revenue, perverse financial incentives reduce the bandwidth customers receive and thus damage human communication.

Communication doesn’t need to be so bad. Over 40 years ago, even long-distance calls connected people well because voices were carried by dedicated copper wires the entire way, with an implicit service-level agreement of microtime phase fidelity. That was expensive, so Ma Bell invented computers to digitize and packetize voices, thus birthing much of the computer revolution. I was there: In 1985, during “divestiture,” I worked at ATT Bell Labs Murray Hill.

Once human bandwidth could be compressed into more cheaply recognizable packets, the race was on to minimize network bandwidth costs by ever-more-efficient voice compression. Unfortunately, that dynamic creates perverse network incentives to reduce bandwidth between communicating humans, although the humans themselves need as much bandwidth as possible. That incentive structure nearly guarantees that our (expensive) need for high-bandwidth interaction will fall victim to the network’s ever-present need for lower costs.

To operate in the best long-term interests of human communication — as opposed to any short-term metrics, especially monetary ones — Zoom needs to establish a long-term revenue model designed to enhance human communication. That is, a model which provides as much bandwidth as people need, in the form they need it, with transparently auditable metrics to prove it’s working. No one knows the structure of such a business yet, but that’s what innovation is for.

### **Better Videoconference Etiquette**



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The challenge: Human conversational habits evolved for in-person interaction and fail in various ways through screens.

Attending to screens for hours on end is really hard on us. It also doesn't work very well because screen interaction is so unnatural. The thousands-fold discrepancy between our high-bandwidth 3D needs and the puny trickle of pixelated "content" is why telecommuting is so hard. Our social instincts need to know who said what, who laughed and who stayed silent. On video calls, it's hard enough just to hear the words at all.

Here's one example of rules of the road (aka "etiquette") that might keep our conversations from crashing: stop looking at faces and concentrate on audio.

Here's why. At first, the video image of someone talking is the perfect way to recognize their face, mannerisms and mood, and to prove to yourself that this is a real live person talking. But once that truth is established, and you trust them, it makes more sense to close your eyes and listen to the words than to look at their face, because our circuits synchronize much faster on audio frequencies (milliseconds) than on screen refresh rates (tens of milliseconds).

Nature's rules for optimum communication tell us to start with video, then move to audio while checking a face only occasionally. As long as everyone agrees on that solution, no one will even worry if you're not looking at them on-screen. And that reduced expectation of on-screen "performance," more than anything, will let people relax during video exchanges, which are one of the weirdest human interactions ever invented by humans.

Let's hope we learn how to use these weird tools right and that their makers make them right for us to use.

**\*William Softky** is a biophysicist who was among the first neuroscientists to understand microtiming.

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## Will the Coronavirus Crisis Bring Down Hungary's Failing Democracy?

Vinicius Bivar

April 14, 2020

**The coronavirus emergency law is the latest element in Hungary's steady descent into authoritarianism.**

History is not short of examples of autocrats who used a crisis to strengthen their grip on power. Our current crisis, triggered by the global spread of the new coronavirus, appears to be no different. Justified by the need for extraordinary measures to address the pandemic, on March 30 the Hungarian parliament approved an emergency law, titled "On Protecting Against the Coronavirus," which granted exceptional powers to Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

The new legislation allows Orban to rule by decree, converting the spread of false information — now punishable by up to five years in prison — and the failure to abide by mandatory lockdown restrictions into criminal offenses. Many fear these new measures will be used beyond the struggle against the COVID-19 crisis to silence Hungary's opposition. Even more worrying is the absence of any reference to an end date or a requirement for renewal of the emergency legislation, which may de facto allow Orban to maintain his exceptional powers indefinitely.

For those familiar with the history of Nazi Germany, the decree evokes a nefarious parallel with Hitler's Enabling Act. In 1933, Hitler exploited the burning of the Reichstag to pass an emergency law that allowed him to enact legislation without consulting parliament, a step decisive to the consolidation of his rule over Germany. Indeed enabled by the act, Hitler removed the autonomy of German states and outlawed non-Nazi political parties. Hitler's new powers were supposed to expire in 1937, however, by that time, the Führer had already

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taken control of German institutions and saw no obstacles to renewing his dictatorial powers.

Although the Hungarian emergency law preserves some parliamentary authority, there is little to inspire certainty that the country would not follow a path similar interwar Germany. Orbán has a notorious track record as an opponent of liberal democracy, and throughout his years in office has worked to erode democratic institutions, lifting legal and political constraints to curb press freedom and the activities of civil society organizations.

In 2012, the coalition formed by Fidesz and the Christian Democrats replaced the existing constitution, introducing reformed electoral and judicial systems which, among other measures, limited the power of Hungarian courts, reduced the number of seats in parliament and reshaped constituency boundaries, leading to criticism from the opposition and international observers.

Later amendments, passed in 2013, also regulated to role of the press and granted public media outlets monopoly over political advertising during national and European elections. In 2018, Orbán strengthened his control over the media through the consolidation of more than 400 media outlets under the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), a government-friendly entity chaired by individuals with connections to the prime minister.

In addition to the undermining of constitutional checks and balances, nativist discourse was also instrumentalized in the gradual process of erosion of democratic institutions in Hungary. As the refugee crisis intensified, Orbán adopted an explicitly anti-immigration stance antagonizing other European leaders who called for a joint effort to tackle one of the greatest migration crises since World War II. Orbán described migrants as a “poison,” stating that “every single migrant poses a security and terror risk” to Hungary. This form of nativist rhetoric was recently employed to legitimize the persecution of NGOs operating in the country.

In 2018, Orbán accused these organizations of promoting illegal immigration and introduced a

legislative package that became known as “Stop Soros” — a reference to the Hungarian-American investor and philanthropist George Soros, the founder of the Open Society Foundations and Orbán’s nemesis. In addition to criminalizing NGOs that offered support to migrants, a special tax law was introduced to penalize NGOs that “promote illegal immigration.”

### **Little Room for Optimism**

This brief overview of Hungary’s descent into authoritarianism offers some perspective on the role of the coronavirus emergency law being just another piece in a complex chain of events that have cumulatively contributed to the demise of Hungarian democracy. Although one would like to take comfort in the assurance by the Hungarian prime minister and his party that parliament retains the authority to restore democratic normalcy, Orbán’s track record since being elected in 2010 leaves little room for optimism.

The passing of the emergency law comes at a moment when Hungarian democracy was finally beginning to show signs of resilience. In the mayoral elections held in 2019, coalitions of opposition parties defeated Orbán’s ruling right-wing Fidesz party in 10 of the 23 major cities across the country, including the capital Budapest, scoring their best result in a decade. Under the new law, however, mayors have little power to challenge Orbán’s authority as any measure adopted by them can now be easily overruled.

For now, one can only hope that, once the COVID-19 crisis is over, the Hungarian opposition will react as it did in 2019, and that the European Union will uphold its values to prevent a dictatorship from taking root in one of its member states.

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## Hope Fades for New Talks in Yemen as Battles Intensify

Fernando Carvajal

April 15, 2020

**The Saudis have declared a unilateral ceasefire in Yemen, but hopes are quickly fading as battles continue.**

**A**fter a five-year-long conflict, hope for a new round of peace talks in Yemen begins to fade away a week into Saudi Arabia's unilateral halt to military operations. Soon after the announcement on April 9, confusion set in over the intent of the ceasefire and the lack of monitoring. Clashes between Houthi militias and Yemeni government forces continue to escalate along various fronts, with Houthi rebels reporting dozens of airstrikes against their positions in Hajja and Mareb.

As the international community welcomed Saudi Arabia's announcement, the UN special envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths, published his framework of how to end the war in Yemen. Soon after, the Houthis introduced their own "Comprehensive National Vision" that included a number of demands, which were mostly directed at Saudi Arabia to prepare the path for a new round of talks and a solution to the conflict. The three announcements exposed the dynamics of the Yemen War and the fog that obscures the path forward.

New territory gains in al-Jawf, Mareb and Sanaa provinces this year have empowered Houthis and weakened the leverage of both the Yemeni government and the Saudi-led coalition. The dynamics of the conflict continue to shift as Houthis prove their capability to maintain drone and missile attacks across the Saudi-Yemeni border and deeper into the government's enclave in Mareb. The basic equation to restart the peace process has three parties that are unwilling to compromise, while "warlords continue to convince the Saudis that they can still win the war," according to Khaled al-Yamani, the former

Yemeni foreign minister. Then there are the southern secessionists who continue to search for a guaranteed seat at the big table.

Some international observers saw the Saudi ceasefire as a sign of potential capitulation amid growing criticism of their conduct during the war or in response to economic stress. But "Saudi Arabia is far from accepting defeat or terms dictated by Houthis considering the rebels' alliance with Iran," says the Mareb-based Yemeni journalist Ali al-Sakani.

There are three issues to consider. First, Saudi Arabia did not appear to have coordinated its decision to announce a ceasefire with Yemen's President Abdu-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Furthermore, media reports and a statement from Deputy Minister of Defense Prince Khaled bin Salman of Saudi Arabia focused on prioritizing public safety amid the coronavirus crisis.

The ceasefire that began at midday on April 9 came as news organizations reported that dozens of Saud family members may have been infected with the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19, and a day before Yemen reported its first case in al-Shihr, Hadhramawt. A week earlier, other media outlets reported that the public health crisis could have led to British personnel leaving the Riyadh-based Air Operations Center that is vital to the conduct of the aerial campaign over Yemen. In all, Hamed al-Bukhayti, a pro-Houthi writer, sees the abrupt announcement by Saudi Arabia as a move to prioritize its own security at home and in Yemen, while preempting any major damage to the chain of command and vital personnel.

Second, Griffiths presented Houthis and the legitimate government of Yemen with his own initiative on April 10. Again, while his initiative mentioned the importance of addressing the public health crisis, it seems to lack any coordination with the parties. The UN envoy tends to propose new road maps for peace talks following a round of talks with the parties involved, which was not the case this month. Nowhere in his statement did Griffiths address the secessionist Southern Transitional Council

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(STC), whose allied armed groups continue to engage Houthis in al-Dhale province and pro-Islah party military elements in Shebwa province.

Again, this highlights the limits of both Saudi Arabia's unilateral announcement and the UN envoy's proposal. While the Saudi government merely aims at a two-week pause, and the envoy rushed to call for a comprehensive dialogue, the government of Yemen is left condemning continued Houthi aggression in Hajja, al-Jawf, Mareb and Taiz.

Third, on April 9, the Houthis published a prepared and unsigned document in the name of the government for national salvation. The document also shows it was prepared by the Houthis' Supreme Revolutionary Committee (SRC), which was led by Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, who is now a member of the Supreme Political Council (SPC) that runs the day-to-day affairs. The document lists a number of demands directed at Saudi Arabia as the leader of the coalition that supports the legitimate government of Yemen. In the document, the Houthis address the air and land blockade and economic constraints, including the lack of salaries for government employees.

For the past two years, the Houthis have insisted that any peace process must begin with direct talks with Saudi Arabia, followed by Yemeni-Yemeni dialogue — meaning the Houthis and the Hadi-led government.

The final point in the Houthi document emphasizes the “unity, independence and territorial integrity” of Yemen, excluding any mention of the STC and its own ambitions. It is interesting to note that the Houthis frame the fight in al-Dhale province as clashes with government troops and coalition mercenaries, coupled with the fact that the Houthis have yet to recognize the UAE-sponsored Security Belt or Elite Forces allied with the STC as anything other than mercenaries. The Houthis do recognize the role and responsibility of the UN within their comprehensive approach to the peace process.

### **Pressure Grows as Leverage Weakens**

International aid organizations continue to warn over deteriorating conditions, adding pressure on donors and Houthi authorities. Over recent months, humanitarian agencies have faced mounting challenges that include Houthi obstruction of the delivery of aid across territory under their control, along with threats from donors to cut funds in response to Houthi corruption. UN agencies have confronted the Houthis since May 2019 over obstruction and rampant corruption without any improvement in the relationship. The conflict between the Houthis and aid organizations has escalated as the Saudi-led coalition refuses to loosen restrictions on imports through the Red Sea port of Hodeida or lift the blockade on Sanaa International Airport.

In recent weeks, the Trump administration in Washington is said to have further pressured Saudi Arabia to find a way out of the conflict. The US warned Saudi Arabia over Houthi advances in al-Jawf and Mareb as concerns grow over the Houthis encircling Mareb city from Sirwah in the west and Murad in the south. Yamani, the former foreign minister, noted that “if al-Jawf, Mareb ... the entire area falls in hands of Houthis, then it would be impossible for the Saudis to defend the desert,” adding to the challenges to restart peace talks while the Houthis have the upper hand.

The government of President Hadi faces the possibility of losing the enclave at Mareb after being expelled from the interim capital of Aden in September 2019.

The pressure on Saudi Arabia grows, not merely as a result of Houthi gains but also as the implementation of the 2019 Riyadh Agreement stalls. Since the withdrawal of UAE troops from southern Yemen last year, Saudi Arabia became the sole mediator between the STC and Hadi's government. So far, the only point implemented since the signing of the deal has been the return of Prime Minister Maeen Abd al-Malek Saeed to Aden. Saudi Arabia has been unable to end the conflict between pro-STC forces and Islah-affiliated government army units in Abyan and

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Shebwa, undoubtedly distracting from the fight against Houthis.

The Saudi government is now tasked with maintaining two major fronts, one against Houthis and the conflict between the STC and the legitimate government.

As various elements push for more confrontations between parties, in the north and the south, Saudi leadership comes under tremendous strain. It remains to be seen if this two-week pause allows Saudi officials to regroup and present new initiatives to move on the UN-sponsored peace proposal or increase financial and materiel support for Murad tribes and government troops in al-Baydha and al-Jawf provinces.

Just prior to the ceasefire announcement, media reports claimed that Saudi Arabia's ministry of defense proposed to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman the procurement of light-attack helicopters, precision-guided munitions for artillery and drones for aerial surveillance. Yet if the conflict in the south escalates, Saudi Arabia may be forced to reach out to the UAE to exert further influence over the STC.

Undoubtedly, the UAE will reengage under its own terms and a list of demands for Hadi regarding the role of the Islah party within his government and the military. It is doubtful the UAE would play a major role with troops fighting Houthis in Hodeida, but under the right circumstances, it could play a positive role in reaching out to both the Houthis and Iran to push for the start of UN-sponsored peace talks this year.

**\*Fernando Carvajal** served on the UN Security Council Panel of Experts of Yemen from April 2017 to March 2019 as an armed groups and regional expert. He has nearly 20 years of experience conducting field work in Yemen and is a specialist in Yemeni politics and tribal relations.

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## **Can America's Progressive Movement Thrive Without Bernie Sanders?**

S. Suresh  
April 17, 2020

**How the political revolution created by Sanders survives and thrives depends on the surrogates filling the void he leaves behind.**

Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders quit his presidential bid in early April and endorsed former Vice President Joe Biden soon thereafter. Sanders' campaign suffered heavily from a coalition of his centrist opponents and could never recover from the surprise poor showing on Super Tuesday, making it just a matter of time before he abandoned the race for the White House.

Politics is terrible and murky even among people whose policies are reasonably aligned. The two progressive leaders in American politics, Senators Elizabeth Warren and Sanders, are guided by different core principles. While Sanders stands for equality, Warren stands for liberty. The two flagbearers of the progressive movement failed to see eye to eye and coalesce their campaign the way centrist candidates did. That proved to be a costly mistake, resulting in both of them aborting their campaigns prematurely.

Unabashedly declaring himself a democratic socialist, Sanders was able to shake the country with a rousing campaign for a five-year period during his two presidential bids. However, at 78, Sanders is in the twilight of his political career and is unlikely to seek reelection for his Senate seat in 2024, let alone a third presidential run. Does this spell the end of the progressive movement Sanders has been instrumental in creating?

### **An American Utopia?**

Despite his infectious passion that has engaged the younger generation of Americans, Sanders

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has not succeeded in challenging the nation to look past itself and look out for others. Even in the midst of one of the worst pandemics in human history, politicians have been unable to rise above politics, govern the country and lead the people safely and responsibly. The richest country on this planet is suffering the worst casualties, exposing its broken health-care system, inadequate testing infrastructure and a lack of supply of protective gear for health workers and the general public alike.

Not a day goes by without the nation's megalomaniac leader, Donald Trump, doing something that is scandalous, parochial and irresponsible. His Republican entourage meekly kowtows to the president's whims, leaving the impotent Democratic politicians flailing miserably, crying foul and accomplishing precious little.

Had Sanders, or any progressive leader, been at the helm during this disaster, science and facts would have dictated policies at the national level. The stimulus money that individuals receive would have been protected from banks and other private debt collectors having first dibs at it. The egregious abuse of power by an administration allowing the richest in the country to avoid paying \$82 billion in taxes by way of a loophole in the stimulus plan would have been inconceivable. Assuaging human suffering, caring for the lives and health of American citizens would have taken precedence over the well-being of corporations and restarting the economy.

Sanders' vision for America is egalitarian, not utopian. In his own words, every American "is entitled to health care as a right, is entitled to a decent paying job as a right, is entitled to a dignified retirement as a right, is entitled to a clean environment as a right, and is entitled to all of the education they need to accomplish their life goals," capturing the essence of what he has been passionately fighting for.

## **Stranglehold of Capitalism**

Strangely, millions of Americans who would benefit from an egalitarian society prefer to stay in the lower echelons of the economic caste system imposed on them by a capitalistic society. The select few who sit on top of the pyramid and wield the power have little incentive to change the system when the status quo is skewed so much in their favor. It is no surprise that Sanders calls his progressive movement a political revolution, for nothing sort of a revolution can bring about a change to this well-entrenched economic caste system foisted by capitalism.

How the political revolution created by Sanders survives and thrives after him depends on the surrogates filling the void he leaves behind. Until they truly become a force to reckon with within the Democratic establishment, they have to learn to win small concessions from the evolutionary policies of centrist Democrats without becoming obstructionists. Inspired by Sanders, it is promising to see many millennials aspire for political office. It would be critical for their aspirations to become reality as in the case of House Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley, Rashida Tlaib and Ro Khanna, all ardent believers in a progressive agenda.

As Congresswoman Omar correctly observes, "the progressive movement has never been about one individual. It is about issues." Shifting the mindset of an entire nation to a progressive agenda, either through a radical revolution, as Sanders advocates, or specifically targeting the excesses of the capitalist system, as Warren believes, will take years, if not decades. We would need a new generation of leaders in positions of political power who are unafraid to place the larger social good ahead of personal gains and the interests of a wealthy few. They must be prepared and ready for capitalism to choke any incremental gains they make toward a more progressive society. Most importantly, they must be savvy enough to deal with it.

\***S. Suresh** is a product executive and writer.

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## Will COVID-19 Change Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia?

Jean AbiNader  
April 27, 2020

**What lies ahead for Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia will be determined by the level of trust governments are able to build with citizens.**

**T**he novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19 spread to North Africa more than two months ago. Since then, there has been speculation among observers that the effects on society, the economy and political life may be changed in both the short term with people's habits and the long term as governments take measures to contain the virus.

### Algeria

In an interesting analogy to how a person's health status may determine their ability to resist the coronavirus, Sarah Feuer writes: "For Algeria and its 43 million inhabitants, a weak medical infrastructure, a year-long political crisis, and a stalled reorientation of an economy that has been overly dependent on hydrocarbons for decades have all made the North African country particularly vulnerable to repercussions from the virus."

Feuer, an associate fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, is not alone in this assessment as the government has been perhaps the slowest to put in place the necessary tools to detect and combat COVID-19. She points out that the "2019 Global Health Security Index, which measures various health-sector capacities in countries around the world—including preparedness to manage pandemics—ranked Algeria 173rd out of 195 countries and 17th out of 21 Arab states (surpassing only Djibouti, Syria, Yemen, and Somalia)." This is clearly not a healthy picture.

Algeria's ally and largest trade partner, China, is doing its part, sending medical supplies, equipment and professionals, along with the

construction of a hospital to treat patients. One of the most notable effects of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the cessation of its biweekly demonstrations by the Hirak, a movement that is opposed to the current government. Now, off the streets, protesters have moved online, raising money for food and medical supplies to hard-hit areas and pointing out the government's shortcomings in addressing the crisis. This has not slowed down the government's push against its opponents as journalists, activists and opposition figures continue to be arrested.

With the plunge in demand for gas and oil worldwide, Algeria is especially vulnerable to economic shocks that disrupt its ability to provide subsidies and services. Announced national budget cuts of 30% may only delay the inevitable drain on foreign reserves, forcing the government to seek external assistance, which may prove quite onerous if it upsets existing arrangements between big business, military and government officials.

### Morocco

In Morocco, King Mohammed VI has received near-unanimous approval for his leadership, yet there are concerns that continued restrictions on the country's media and activists portend challenges that may signal a more restrictive regime after the pandemic is over. As an energy importer, Morocco has benefited from low energy prices, but remittances, tourism, transportation and hospitality services are all suffering as a result of global restrictions and weaknesses in supply chains. The Moroccan economy can hardly afford to suffer a prolonged shutdown, and many small businesses have already disappeared. The government has few resources to sustain small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and larger companies, and its social and health services networks are strained.

Moroccans have taken up the challenges of social distancing and lack of contact fairly well for the moment and, in some ways, the Islamic month of Ramadan has helped. However, closing mosques and the inconsistent availability of food



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items and medicines are generating dissent. With more testing being carried out and greater outreach into the rural areas, the number of cases may well increase beyond the capacity of the public health system. With the nationwide lockdown extended until May 20, right before the Eid al-Fitr holiday, the government is hoping that its early interventions, along with increased testing and treatment protocols, will absorb most of the new cases and take Morocco through any spikes in infections.

As with other countries in the region, the government has released thousands of prisoners from jail to reduce the threat of spreading the virus in confined facilities. Yet since March 20, authorities have arrested thousands of individuals for violating the state of emergency or for spreading false information. Most of these have resulted in fines rather than incarceration.

Morocco, along with the rest of the world, faces a great deal of economic uncertainty. Official figures show that 700,000 workers lost their jobs and some 113,000 businesses closed from March 20 to April 1. This has severely depleted the state's safety net, despite funds from international donors to support SMEs in this difficult transition. Questions are being asked not only about Morocco's recovery, but its supply chain and customer links — largely in Europe — which are also under duress with no bright prospects on the horizon.

### **Tunisia**

Like neighboring Morocco, Tunisia mobilized its rich human resources to help in the fight against the coronavirus. Engineering and health students and technology innovators are working on a variety of equipment and IT programs to boost the country's anti-virus capacity. For example, as in Morocco, Tunisians now have locally manufactured ventilators, personal protective equipment (PPE) and other critical resources for protection and treatment. The Pasteur Institute in Tunis has already decoded the local strain of COVID-19, which is critical to developing a vaccine, and technicians are pushing ahead with

applying artificial intelligence to the identification of early signs of the virus through X-rays.

While the number of confirmed infections is currently low in Tunisia, reporting is now coming in on the rural and interior areas where the infrastructure and professional staff are limited. The biggest hit, however, is to the economy as tourism, remittances, hospitality, transportation and services are suffering from lockdowns in Europe and restricted movement across borders. This has forced the Tunisian government, which has been in deficit spending and slow growth for the last five years, to adopt a support package for the poor, SMEs and various sectors of the economy.

The economic stimulus includes some 450 million dinars (\$155 million) in aid to poor families or those who have lost their jobs due to the coronavirus outbreak. In addition to a postponement on taxes on SMEs, repayments on low-income employee loans are being delayed as well. The International Monetary Fund is providing a \$745 million loan, the European Union has pledged a grant of \$273 million, Italy a \$55 million grant and a loan of \$280 million from the Islamic Development Bank.

### **Politics Not as Usual**

How these countries emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic will shape their economic, social and political futures, with little assurances that the social contracts — which have been strained in the past decade — will survive without key alterations. As Intissar Fakir argues in an article on Carnegie Middle East, “As the aftereffects of the Covid-19 pandemic become clearer, they are likely to bring to the fore the policy failures that made the North African nations so fragile and susceptible to the virus in the first place. Economic mismanagement and underinvestment in infrastructure and human development have resulted in systems characterized by inequality and social precariousness. The governments of the three countries might be able to reinvent themselves in the short term, but beyond that the

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consequences of their errors are potentially destabilizing.”

While Morocco may seem to be the most stable based on its more diverse economic foundations and the leadership of the king, it has a weak political system, large wealth disparities, too many unfulfilled pledges from the government and a large youth population in need of jobs. These conditions are true in Tunisia as well, except that it lacks a unifying national authority and suffers from a continued dysfunctional political system and a faltering economy. Algeria, the most repressive regime, will certainly have to face off with the Hirak once the number of new infections has gone down and demonstrators return to the streets. Their demands, like the others, for an open, effective, transparent government and significant efforts to create jobs and diversify the economy may be beyond the scope of the traditional political leadership.

What lies ahead for Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia will very much be determined by the level of trust governments are able to build with their constituents based on how they combat the coronavirus, protect the needy, develop more comprehensive health sectors and work transparently to promote economic recovery. This is a global phenomenon but especially critical in countries struggling to survive.

**\*Jean AbiNader** is an international development consultant working on change issues.

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## **Brazil Is Heading Into a Perfect Storm**

Lenin Cavalcanti Guerra

April 28, 2020

**The combination of health, economic and political emergencies have come together to create a truly perfect storm for Brazil.**

**A**pril has been a hard month for the largest and most populous Latin American country. While the whole world is engulfed in the COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed over 200,000 globally to date and unleashed an unprecedented economic crisis, Brazil has also been going through political upheaval. The combination of health, economic and political emergencies have come together to create a truly perfect storm. To compound Brazil's COVID-19 emergency and poor economic performance in 2019, the minister of justice, Sergio Moro, resigned on April 24, dealing another blow to President Jair Bolsonaro's administration.

Undeniably, the effects of the COVID-19 on the country are by far the most serious. On April 28, Brazil surpassed 4,600 coronavirus deaths. In areas like Manaus and Belem do Para, the most populous urban centers of in the north and the Amazon regions, and Brazil's largest cities like Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Recife, the health systems are on a verge of collapse. Pictures of bulldozers digging mass graves have shocked the country as the number of infections keeps climbing, now at over 67,000.

### **Worse to Come**

Amidst it all, Jair Bolsonaro has adopted a rhetoric of denial against the virus. From calling it “a fantasy created by the media” to “the little flu” or “little cold,” the president has been downplaying the effects of COVID-19 since February. He started a political campaign against state governors and mayors who had adopted lockdown measures, calling these an “exaggeration.” On April 16, Bolsonaro fired his minister of health, the popular Dr. Henrique Mandetta, an advocate of social distancing and isolation measures that Bolsonaro has publicly ignored. The president has chosen a low-profile doctor, Nelson Teich, who has not yet released a plan for containing the pandemic. The new minister has also adopted a dubious position on self-isolation.

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But the worse was still to come. By far the most popular minister in Bolsonaro's cabinet was Sergio Moro. Moro was the judge in Operation Car Wash, an anti-corruption task force that uncovered one of the biggest corruption schemes in the country's history, leading to the arrest of over 80 business people and politicians across Brazil, including the former President Luiz Inacio "Lula" da Silva. Well known for his work against corruption, Moro has accepted the invitation from the newly elected president Bolsonaro in 2018 to be lead the Justice Ministry, giving up his career as a federal judge.

Moro was often singled out by analysts as the "moral ballast" of the Bolsonaro government. Bolsonaro ran on a promise to eradicate corruption, but since coming to power, scandals involving his inner circle have surfaced. These include his three sons, Carlos, a councilman for the municipality of Rio de Janeiro, Eduardo, a congressman for the state of São Paulo, and Flavio, a senator for Rio de Janeiro state.

Moro's resignation was a significant political event, without a mitigating written statement claiming personal issues or need for rest, or any similar common excuses. The departing minister called an open press conference. Considering that Bolsonaro treats the press as an enemy, especially Grupo Globo — the most prominent Brazilian media conglomerate — the way the announcement was delivered was an obvious dig at the president.

The content was explosive: Moro accused the president of trying to interfere in the federal police inquiries, stating that Bolsonaro wanted to nominate a police supervisor whom he could call up for details on investigations, which is forbidden by the Brazilian Constitution.

The resignation prompted swift reactions, with Bolsonaro publicly denying the accusations. Surrounded by his cabinet, the president criticized Moro's work leading the Ministry of Justice. But while trying to defend himself against the allegations of interfering in the federal police investigations, Bolsonaro has — consciously or not — admitted to meddling in at

least one case, the investigation into the attack he suffered during a 2018 campaign rally that almost cost him his life.

Following the president's statement, Moro sent screenshots of exchanges with the president, in which Bolsonaro talks about reasons to replace the police supervisor, to the most popular national news program, Grupo Globo's "Jornal Nacional." It is a signal that the former judge has more material against his former boss.

### **Arm-Wrestling**

Now the two former allies are arm-wrestling on social media. Millions of supporters are now divided, many of them disappointed with the president and others labeling the former judge as a traitor. The following days will be tough for the president. In light of his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, Bolsonaro is losing political support. The governors from Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro have broken with Bolsonaro months ago, and the governor from Goias state, a physician and one of the president's early supporters, has also announced his break with the administration.

The president's most powerful political enemy at this point, however, is the speaker of parliament, Rodrigo Maia. They have been exchanging barbs since the start of last year. In April 2019, Maia called the Bolsonaro government "devoid of ideas." He is the one in position to start the procedures of a possible impeachment process against the president.

In this adverse political scenario, COVID-19 plays a highlighted role. If the virus continues to kill thousands of people, as it has in the last days, the president's already fragile position could become unsustainable. A decrease in the number of cases, hospitalizations and deaths caused by the coronavirus would not necessarily save Bolsonaro, but it could give him more time to rebuild his political base — at least until the next controversy. Meanwhile, Brazil remains caught between the devil and the deep sea.

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## **Rohingya Refugee Camps Are the Next Frontline in COVID-19 Fight**

Daniel Sullivan

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**The Rohingya are crammed into the largest refugee settlement in the world. In such conditions, a virus like COVID-19 could spread like wildfire.**

**T**he COVID-19 pandemic is a truly global crisis, challenging even the most advanced health systems and economies in the world. But more devastation looms as the novel coronavirus has not yet reached many of the world's most vulnerable populations.

Among them are more than 900,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, who are crammed into the largest refugee settlement in the world with a population density four times that of New York City — conditions in which a virus like COVID-19 will spread like wildfire. The confirmation of the first case of COVID-19 in the camps located in Cox's Bazar will mark a new frontline in global efforts to fight the pandemic. The time to step up efforts is now. Yet unnecessary constraints are already holding back the response.

### **The Risk to Rohingya Refugees**

Having fled genocide at the hands of Myanmar's military, Rohingya refugees have found refuge in neighboring Bangladesh. But they have also faced new challenges. Bangladesh has maintained restrictions on internet and mobile communications that slow efforts to educate refugees about how to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. The inability to communicate in a timely and effective fashion will also hinder efforts to track the spread of the disease and will force sick refugees to travel inside densely

populated camps. A COVID-19 hotline set up in Cox's Bazar is largely useless without reliable networks or the right to own a phone, which Bangladeshi authorities have banned.

Meanwhile, dangerous rumors are circulating through the camps. UN surveys suggest that many residents mistakenly believe that only "bad" Muslims are susceptible to the virus or that infected people will be killed by authorities. Bangladesh's policies to increasingly limit Rohingya civil society and to begin building fencing around the camps have eroded trust and undermined those who are best placed to counter such false information.

The role of the Rohingya community itself will only become more important as Bangladesh understandably takes steps to prevent the spread of COVID-19, including limiting humanitarian access to only what are considered critical life-saving services. Yet Bangladeshi authorities and UN officials have not done enough to empower refugees. As a Refugees International report in February found, from absence in high-level discussions about their future to a lack of representative structures and adequate consultations on day-to-day projects, "Rohingya are still not being adequately informed or engaged on issues of vital importance to their lives and futures."

More recently, in response to the emergence of the pandemic, Bangladeshi authorities and UN agencies have expanded health training and hygiene awareness campaigns and set up additional intensive care units. Hundreds of community volunteers are being trained and deployed throughout the camps to raise awareness and to look for signs of the virus. But reaching the hundreds of thousands in the camps remains a challenge. Earlier efforts by Bangladeshi authorities and UN officials to engage and empower Rohingya refugees would have better prepared the population to respond to an unforeseen challenge like COVID-19. Redoubling efforts to do so now will be essential to ensuring the best response possible.

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## **The Coronavirus in Bangladesh**

The reality is that Bangladesh faces its own capacity challenges, lacking sufficient respirators and testing kits for its own citizens. Of a population of more than 160 million, only 55,000 people had been tested at the time of publishing. Just a few hundred tests have been conducted in Cox's Bazar, the district in which the refugee camps are located.

As of April 28, more than 6,400 cases and 155 deaths have been reported in Bangladesh, mostly in Dhaka. That number is probably already much higher and likely to grow quickly. In Cox's Bazar district, 15 cases have now been confirmed. While the authorities have not officially reported any cases in the refugee camps as of yet, hundreds of Rohingya are already being isolated. Humanitarian workers on the ground say it is only a matter of time before cases of infection are confirmed.

In the face of such challenges, preparation efforts cannot be limited by unnecessary restrictions. Bangladesh should immediately lift mobile and internet restrictions and avoid moves like building fences that will only further erode trust in the community. Even as needed isolation measures restrict access for humanitarians, essential services must continue, and Bangladeshi authorities must work with UN agencies to train and equip the community members who will be the first line of defense in the response.

The world cannot afford to ignore the most vulnerable populations like the Rohingya. Containing the global spread of the coronavirus does not end with domestic efforts in the most advanced health systems. It must include the world's most vulnerable to be truly effective.

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