

## The political Implications of COVID- 19 in Sub Saharan Africa

### التداعيات السياسية لكوفيد-19 في إفريقيا جنوب الصحراء

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#### Abstract

COVID- 19 is one of the major challenges and threats facing the whole world Since 2019. African countries are part of the global scene that has been negatively affected by the implications of the pandemic in all spheres. In the African context, the political implications are worthy of attention, notwithstanding the other economic, educational, social, etc implications of the pandemic all over the continent. As a result, African states adopted some initiatives that aimed at strengthening cooperation to face such pandemic and to reduce its negative impact all over the continent. In this context, this paper aims at studying and analyzing the political implications of COVID- 19 in the African context, with special emphasis on sub- Saharan Africa, together with the efforts that have been exerted by the political leadership in different African countries to deal with such crisis. The paper then concludes that African countries varied in regards to their approach in dealing with the pandemic and its implications, and despite all the efforts that have been exerted in this regard, there are many challenges that undermined the attempts of the political leadership in sub- Saharan Africa to contain the negative implications of COVID- 19, especially on the political level.

**Keywords:** Covid- 19- Sub Saharan Africa- Political Implications- State of Emergency- Authoritarianism

## المستخلص

يعد كوفيد-19 أحد التحديات والتهديدات الرئيسية التي تواجه العالم بأسره منذ عام 2019. ولقد تأثرت الدول الأفريقية بالتداعيات بالغة الخطورة الناجمة عن هذا الوباء في شتى المجالات. وعلى الرغم من الآثار الاقتصادية والاجتماعية والصحية والتعليمية الكارثية للوباء على الساحة الأفريقية، إلا أن التداعيات السياسية لانتشاره قد بدت من الأهمية بمكان لدرجة تسترعي الانتباه، حيث استغلت بعض الحكومات الأفريقية الظروف الاستثنائية التي تمر بها أفريقيا والعالم نتيجة انتشار الوباء من أجل تعزيز سلطاتها وقبضتها على مفاصل الدولة، الأمر الذي يثير العديد من المخاوف بشأن إمكانية تعزيز السلطوية في سياق حالات الطوارئ التي شهدتها العديد من دول القارة في خضم الجائحة. وانطلاقاً من ذلك، تهدف هذه الورقة إلى دراسة وتحليل التداعيات السياسية لجائحة كوفيد 19 في دول أفريقيا جنوب الصحراء، وذلك بغية التعرف على الآليات التي اتبعتها وكذا المسارات التي انتهجتها هذه الدول لمواجهة الجائحة والحد من آثارها، وما لذلك من تداعيات سياسية قد تؤثر على مجمل التفاعلات والأوضاع السياسية في هذه الدول.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** كوفيد 19- السلطوية- أفريقيا جنوب الصحراء- التداعيات السياسية للجائحة.

## I. Introduction

The widespread of COVID- 19 in the world reflects a global challenge that really needs a collective action to contain the virus and address its devastating effects. Any failure in the containment of the virus in one country will result in massive repercussions that could threaten the safety of other countries. The urgency of the situation, together with the announcement of global public health guidelines issued by the WHO necessitated the imposition of drastic measures by governments to contain the virus and mitigate its impact on the population in the short term and try to address the long-term socio- cultural, economic and political consequences. With the outbreak of the pandemic in Africa, governments across the continent took very strict measures in an attempt to contain its spread. Despite the fact that these measures were necessary and that they were supposed to be a step in the right direction, they had profound implications on the countries of the continent, as some

of which have unfortunately had unintended negative effects on citizens all over the continent.

In this context, this paper aims at analyzing the political implications of COVID- 19 in Sub Saharan Africa (SSA), in an attempt to answer the question; to what extent do the legal responses and the political implications of the pandemic reflect a new wave of authoritarianism in Sub-Saharan Africa? For such purpose the paper is divided into Five main sections, in addition to the introduction and conclusion. The first section presents the methodology and theoretical framework of the paper. The Second section provides an overview of the pandemic in SSA. The third section sheds the light on the major responses undertaken by African governments to contain the pandemic. The fourth section traces the main political implications related to the pandemic in SSA. The fifth and last section presents the major challenges undermining African attempts to control the pandemic and mitigate its implication. The paper ends with a conclusion of the main results of the study.

## **II. Methodology and Theoretical framework:**

Theoretically, Authoritarianism refers to obedience to authority in a way that opposes autonomy of individuals in thought and action. As a form of government, authoritarianism is based on the concentration of power in a leader or in a limited number of people considered to be the elite who are not constitutionally accountable to the people. Authoritarianism is customarily linked with dictatorship, in contrast to democracy. Authoritarianism provides the conceptual framework for modern dictatorship, and in many contexts the two terms are used interchangeably. Historically, Leaders in authoritarian systems used to exercise their power arbitrarily and considered themselves above existing law. Moreover, modern authoritarian systems used to operate through single, dominant parties, which enjoy full control over the government and other key parts of the society, especially the economy. They totally rejected free elections, and it was almost impossible for citizens to create opposition parties or groups within authoritarian regimes. (Bedeski)

In fact, there are many political and economic forces driving authoritarianism. Wars, revolutions and other historical processes including decolonization and industrialization led to the destruction of many political systems. For instance, the failure of capitalism and democracy that aggravated in the great depression of the

1930s provided a perfect opportunity for dictators to take charge of the state and economy. Lenin, Hitler and Stalin gained public admiration at a critical stage for their success in reviving their economies. This gave the executive the chance to overthrow democracy and rule dictatorially. Authoritarianism may appear as a result of other social and political problems, these may include nation- building as in Africa after decolonization, they may also include the presence of multiple ethnic groups together with high rate of instability that may create a demand for stronger executive as in many cases within the African context. Generally, authoritarian regimes are formed owing to the failures of democratic mechanisms in restoring stability and retaining power. However, practically it is very difficult to trace all the reasons underlying the formation of authoritarian regimes as they are really complex and they usually differ from one case to another. (Hassan, 2014)

African countries have a long history of single- party rule and military rule. However, since the end of the cold war with the collapse of the former USSR, and the rise of the third wave of democratization in Africa, the majority of African countries had to quit such forms of government as authoritarianism -or at least pretend that- in favor of democratization and multi-partism. Moreover, they had to organize free and fair elections and to apply structural adjustment programs in an attempt to abide by the political and economic conditionality imposed by the USA as a pre requisite for financial support. Three decades ahead, Africa is still within the process of democratization, and the situation is getting politically and economically worse, as the political elite has managed in many situations to manipulate elections in an attempt to retain power and keep control over the economy and wealth.

With the outbreak of Covid- 19, authoritarianism started to manifest itself in the African context in a different way. In an attempt to study why and how this happened, it is important to explain the conceptual link between authoritarianism and the political economy of neoliberalism. As Harrison argues, 'as a region of the world capitalist political economy, Africa is the epitome of neoliberalism as a universal project to remake societies in its image' (Harrison 2019). It is important here to notice that neoliberalism as a project of a capitalist class rule is by its very nature anti-democratic in a sense that it involves using state power to advance the interests of "the markets", or the pivilged elites that enjoy full control over the

economy and wealth of the state at the expense of the people (Bruff 2014, Bruff and Tansel 2019). Within this context, the paper argues that the political implications of the pandemics, primarily the so-called “return of the state”, arguably do present a new wave of authoritarianism, triggered precisely by neoliberalism’s final loss of democratic legitimacy in the wake of the global social crisis induced by Covid-19 (Šumonja 2020).

### **III. Overview of the scope of COVID 19 pandemic in SSA:**

It was not until mid February 2020 that COVID- 19 started to penetrate the African continent. The first confirmed case in Africa was in Egypt on 14<sup>th</sup> February 2020. On the 27<sup>th</sup> February, Nigeria confirmed its first case, an Italian citizen who worked in Nigeria and returned from Milan. (BBC news, 28 March 2020) It was the first case of COVID- 19 in sub-Saharan Africa, followed by Senegal, then South Africa, Cameroon, Togo, Burkina Faso and DRC. The virus started to spread in almost all regions in Sub Saharan Africa. Table 1 shows the date of the first confirmed COVID- 19 case in all countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. Most of the early confirmed cases were recorded arriving either from Europe or the USA. (Maclean, 17 March 2020) It has been argued that there are many more un-reported COVID-19 cases in many African countries, which was said to be as a result of the less developed healthcare systems in many countries in SSA. Experts have worried that COVID-19 spreading could be out of control in Africa, owing to the inadequate healthcare systems on the continent, facing many problems such as lack of equipment, lack of funding, insufficient training of healthcare workers, and inefficient data transmission. (Beaubien 2020) The United Nations argued that 74 million test kits and 30,000 ventilators will be needed by the continent's 1.3 billion people in 2020. (Burke, 26 April 2020) In this context, The World Health Organization helped many countries on the continent set up laboratories for COVID-19 testing. In spite of the efforts led by the WHO to provide many countries in SSA with the necessary information and equipment needed to control the pandemic, many of such countries faced problems, as the supply of ventilators was low in much of Africa, and by the mid April 2020, 41 countries had only 2,000 ventilators between them, and ten countries had no ventilators at all. Even in basic supplies like soap and

water there were shortages in many parts of the continent. (Maclean and Marks 2020)

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 2020, Lesotho became the last African country to report a case of COVID-19. By the end of May 2020, more than half of all African countries were experiencing community transmission, despite the limited testing capacity they have. (Akinwotu, 2020)

**Table 1: Date of the first confirmed COVID- 19 cases in SSA**

Country	Date of the first confirmed case
Nigeria	27 <sup>th</sup> February
Senegal	2 <sup>nd</sup> March
South Africa	5 <sup>th</sup> March
Cameroon, Togo	6 <sup>th</sup> March
Burkina Faso, DRC	10 <sup>th</sup> March
Ivory coast	11 <sup>th</sup> March
Ethiopia, Kenya, Ghana, Guinea, Sudan, Gabon	13 <sup>th</sup> March
Central African Republic, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Mauritania, Eswatini, Namibia, Rwanda, Seychelles	14 <sup>th</sup> March
Benin, Somaila, Tanzania, Liberia	16 <sup>th</sup> March
Gambia	17 <sup>th</sup> March
Djibouti, Zambia, Mauritius	18 <sup>th</sup> March
Angola, Chad, Niger	19 <sup>th</sup> March

Country	Date of the first confirmed case
Cape verde, Madagaskar, Uganda, Zimbabwe	20 <sup>th</sup> March
Eritrea	21 <sup>st</sup> March
Mozambique	22 <sup>nd</sup> March
Mali, Guinea Bissau	25 <sup>th</sup> March
Botswana	30 <sup>th</sup> March
Burundi, Sierra Leone	31 <sup>st</sup> March
Malawi	2 <sup>nd</sup> April
South Sudan	5 <sup>th</sup> April
São Tomé and Príncipe	6 <sup>th</sup> April
Comoros	30 <sup>th</sup> April
Lesotho	13 <sup>th</sup> May

**Source:** Timeline of COVID- 19 pandemic

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline\\_of\\_the\\_COVID-19\\_pandemic#Timeline\\_by\\_month\\_and\\_year](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_the_COVID-19_pandemic#Timeline_by_month_and_year)

By the beginning of June 2020, it has been obvious that the number of confirmed new cases is accelerating. It took the continent a period of 98 days to record the first 100,000 cases, and only 18 days for the second 100,000, which was recorded on the 18<sup>th</sup> June 2020. Moreover, the pace of acceleration has continued, with cases passing both the 300,000 and 400,000 marks on the 6<sup>th</sup> of July. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of July 2020, cases had exceeded half a million, with the largest number being recorded in South Africa. On the 20<sup>th</sup> July, the WHO voiced alarm at the spread of COVID- 19 in Africa, stating that South Africa's surging numbers could be a precursor for further outbreaks across the continent. By the 6<sup>th</sup> August, The number exceeded a million, with three countries in SSA making up the largest number of the

total confirmed cases: South Africa, Ethiopia and Nigeria. It is worth mentioning that the true case numbers are believed to go far beyond the confirmed counts, owing to low testing rates in many African countries. (Burke, 6 August 2020)

Despite the above mentioned acceleration of COVID- 19 cases in Sub Saharan Africa, the mortality rates in African countries are relatively low compared to those in Europe. This is in part due to the younger age of their populations. (Burke, 6 August 2020) On the 20<sup>th</sup> of August 2020, the director of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) expressed his cautious optimism as the number of new cases in SSA started to take downturn, considering this as a "sign of hope". (BBC news, 20 August 2020)

#### **IV. National Legal responses towards the pandemic in SSA:**

As the pandemic expanded globally, countries of SSA started undertaking a package of responses that were similar in a way or another, in an attempt to reduce the negative repercussions of the pandemic. This section aims at exploring all the official legal responses that have been announced by governments all over the continent, with special emphasis on countries of SSA. The responses were as follows:

##### **1. Fiscal and monetary policy responses**

At the fiscal policy level, the majority of African governments announced either an economic stimulus package or new federal healthcare spending in direct response to COVID-19. As for the monetary policy, By June, over twenty African central banks had reduced the central bank policy rates, and over thirty had announced policy measures in response to the economic and market effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. (Hale, Thomas, Sam Webster, Anna Petherick, Toby Phillips, and Beatriz Kira 2020)

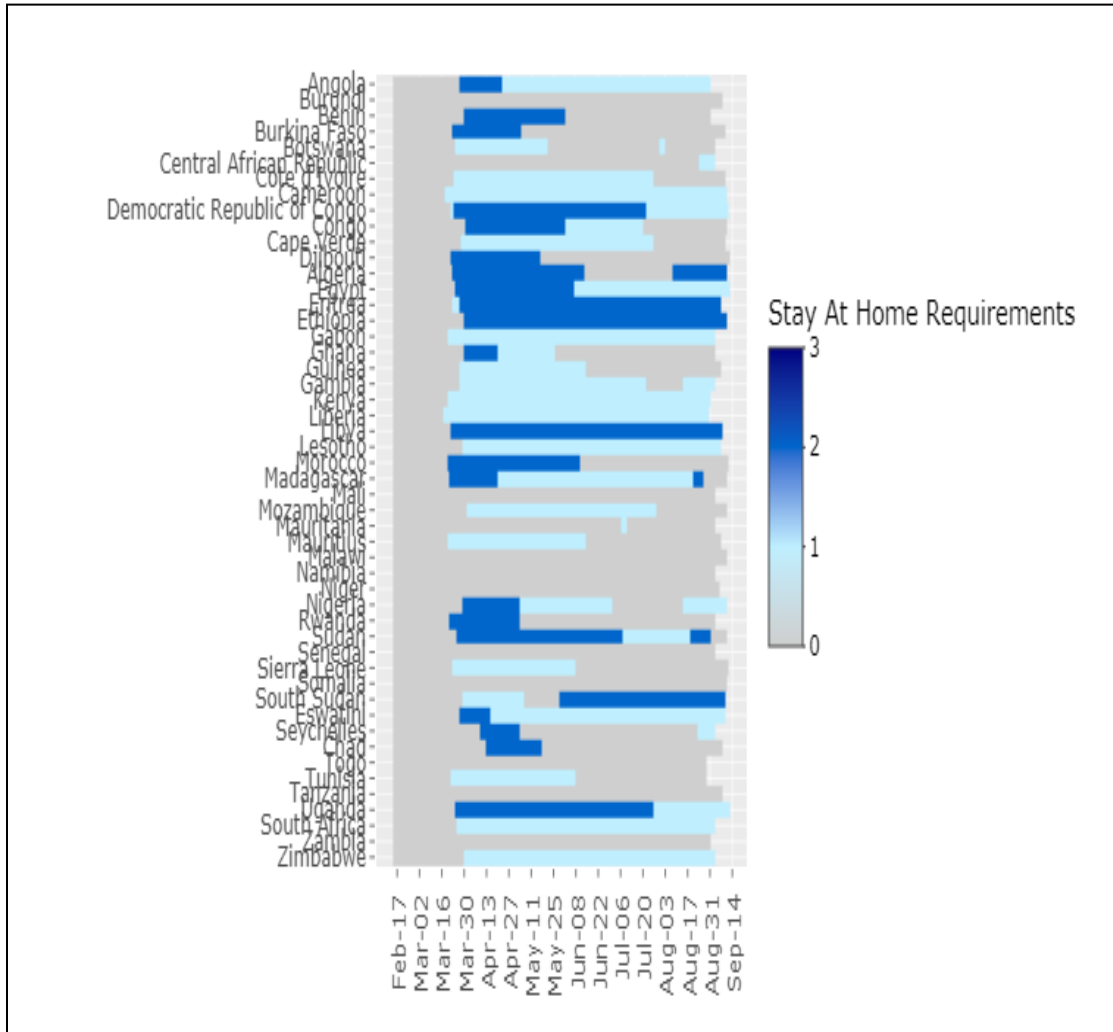
##### **2. National Lockdowns and school closures**

The chart below refers to the status of national lockdowns or ‘stay-at-home’ orders that have been announced across African countries since the beginning of the pandemic. Each color corresponds to the strictness of the lockdown as follows: Gray (level 0) – No measures have been taken; light blue (level 1) – The government has only recommended reduction of movement; Blue (level 2) – The government has



imposed ‘stay-at-home’ restrictions, with exceptions for daily exercise, grocery shopping, and ‘essential’ trips; Navy blue (level 3) – The government has required not leaving house with minimal exceptions (eg. allowed to leave once a week, or only one person can leave at a time, etc).

**Chart 1: National lockdowns in Africa**

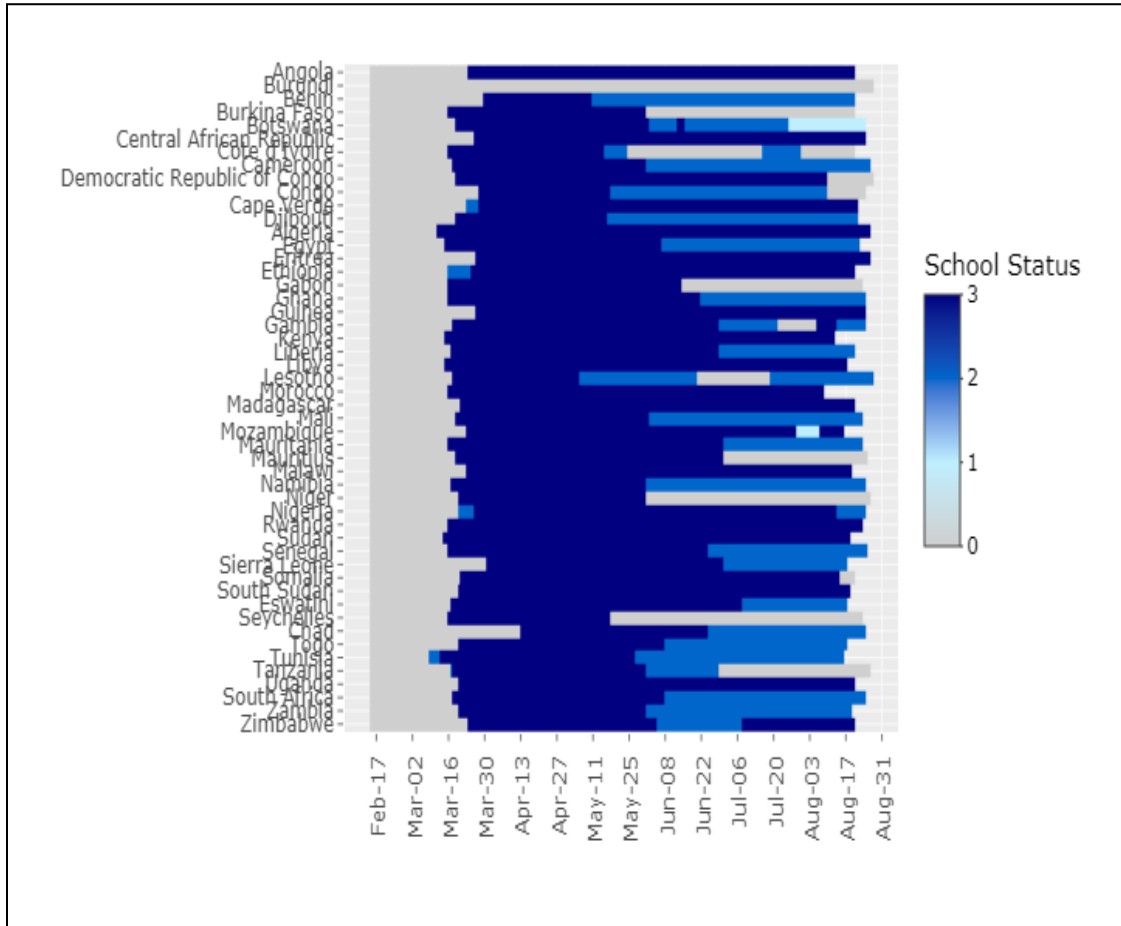


**Source:** Hale, Thomas, Sam Webster, Anna Petherick, Toby Phillips, and Beatriz Kira (2020). [Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker](#), Blavatnik School of Government.

In regards to the school closures, the chart below shows policy approaches towards school closures across African countries. Each color corresponds to the strictness of school closures as follows: Gray (level 0) – No measures have been

taken; light blue (level 1) – The government has only recommended school closures; Blue (level 2) – The government has required the closure of some schools (i.e. just high school, or just public schools); Navy blue (level 3) – The government has required all schools to close at all levels. (Hale, Thomas, Sam Webster, Anna Petherick, Toby Phillips, and Beatriz Kira 2020)

**Chart 2: School closure status in Africa**



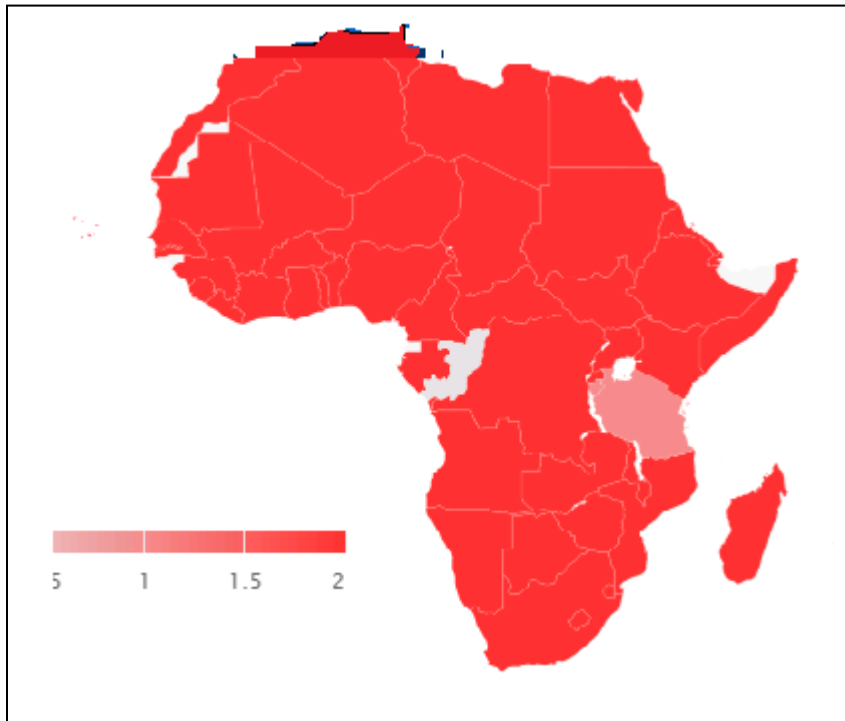
**Source:** Hale, Thomas, Sam Webster, Anna Petherick, Toby Phillips, and Beatriz Kira (2020). [Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker](#), Blavatnik School of Government.

### 3. COVID- 19 testing policy status

The following map shows the countries which have applied a testing policy in place for COVID-19. As shown on the map, the gray color refers to countries with no testing policy in place (level zero testing), which refers to Congo. The light pink refers to countries of level 1 testing, where only those who both (a) have symptoms

AND (b) meet specific criteria (i.e. key workers, admitted to hospital, came into contact with a known case, returned from overseas) are tested. This case is evident in Tanzania as shown on the map. The dark pink refers to countries with level 2 testing, by which anyone showing COVID-19 symptoms is tested. And the majority of African countries lie in this category. (Hale, Thomas, Sam Webster, Anna Petherick, Toby Phillips, and Beatriz Kira 2020)

**Map 1: COVID- 19 testing policy in Africa by country**



**Source:** Hale, Thomas, Sam Webster, Anna Petherick, Toby Phillips, and Beatriz Kira (2020). [Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker](#), Blavatnik School of Government.

#### **4. Emergency declarations**

By the end of April 2020, more than 25 African countries had declared a state of emergency or state of disaster. Many did so even before one case of COVID-19 was confirmed. The table below shows countries where a state of emergency has been declared and the date of declaration. (Hale, Thomas, Sam Webster, Anna Petherick, Toby Phillips, and Beatriz Kira 2020)

**Table 2: Emergency Declarations in countries of SSA**

country	declaration	Date of declaration
Angola	State of Emergency	March 25 2020
Botswana	Public health Emergency	March 31 2020
Burkina Faso	Public Health State of Alert	March 26 2020
Cape Verde	State of Emergency	March 28 2020
Ivory coast	State of Emergency	March 23 2020
DRC	State of Emergency	March 24 2020
Equatorial Guinea	State of Emergency	March 22 2020
Eswatini	State of Disaster	March 27 2020
Ethiopia	State of Emergency	April 8 2020
Gabon	State of Emergency	April 10 2020
Gambia	State of Emergency	March 21 2020
Guinea	State of Emergency	March 27 2020
Guinea Bissau	State of Emergency	March 27 2020
Lesotho	State of Emergency	March 18 2020

**Source:** COVID-19 Africa Watch, <https://covid19africawatch.org/africa-policy-monitor/>

## **V. Political Implications of COVID 19 in SSA:**

The outbreak of COVID- 19 pandemic has had devastating effects across the globe, including Africa. The implications of the pandemic on the continent were catastrophic in all economic, social, political and security aspects. Thereby, Africa is predicted to be the most affected continent by the pandemic. This is due to major economic losses in the revenue stream and decline of the GDP by 3- 8% in 2020

alone.(Chergui 2020, 2) Despite the fact that the pandemic first appeared to be a health issue, its implications were far reaching not only in the socio- economic sphere but also on the political one. This raised many questions on the Ability of African countries to contain the pandemic and –most importantly- to deal with its socio- economic and political consequences. This part of the paper aims at shedding the light on the political implications of COVID- 19 pandemic in the continent, with special attention given to countries of sub Saharan Africa. The following are some of the most significant political implications that are either directly related to the pandemic, or related to one or more – more of the measures and policies undertaken by African countries in response to the pandemic.

### **1. Suspended electoral processes:**

Around 22 African countries are scheduled to hold elections in 2020. Several countries have already held their elections early this year, before the declaration of the pandemic by the WHO (Guinea, Mali and Togo). Within these circumstances, some countries are preparing to proceed with elections as planned or are deliberating their feasibility, while taking necessary precautions as needed; others have decided to postpone polls. Ethiopia, Gambia, Nigeria and Zimbabwe postponed their polls due to COVID- 19. Such delays are particularly sensitive in some countries with highly polarized political landscape, as well as in countries with no constitutional provisions for interim governance. (UN 2020, 21)

Citizens all over the continent had different concerns regarding elections at that critical time. Whereas some citizens and political actors had concerns that many governments may take advantage of the pandemic to entrench themselves beyond their constitutional limits; other political parties, citizens and groups made calls for governments to postpone elections until the pandemic is contained, in an attempt to reduce the spread of the virus in one hand, and to avoid the disenfranchisement of citizens in areas that are most affected by the pandemic in the other hand. (Chergui 2020, 3)

### **2. Reduced operational effectiveness of UN missions:**

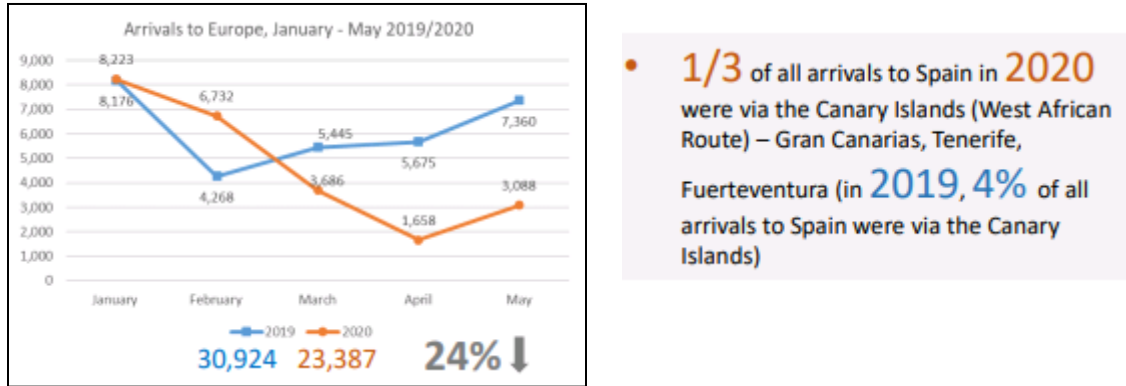
The pandemic had great impact on the global capacities to support peace and security efforts in Africa. There are currently 7 UN peacekeeping operations based in Africa, and 17 special political missions working on African issues, including UN missions and country teams and regionally led operations. For instance, the AU- led

mission in Somalia, the multinational joint task force in the Lake Chad basin and the G5 Sahel joint force. The pandemic affected the operational effectiveness of UN missions, through many restrictions that have been imposed on troops' rotation, regional travel, or other necessary adjustments in operational practices. Despite such constraints, the UN reports argue that all UN missions continue to fulfill their mandates, provided with support to all host country preparedness and response plans. UN missions are trying to adapt with restrictions imposed due to the pandemic, increasingly relying on technology to stay actively engaged with different parties and stakeholders while strictly adhering to COVID- 19 related host country regulations. Notwithstanding all these efforts undertaken by the UN to fulfill their mandates and keep their missions operating, COVID- 19 restrictions have inevitably affected the effectiveness of UN missions in general. (UN 2020, 22)

### **3. High risks (Restrictions) for migrants and asylum seekers:**

The outbreak of COVID- 19 pandemic had strong implications on global mobility. Lockdowns adopted by many countries all over the world restricted mobility to a great extent. Citizens in African countries were really affected by such restrictions. Border closures have limited the opportunities for asylum seekers, as asylum procedures have been suspended in many countries. Within these circumstances, land movements from Mali to Mauritania and from Chad/ Sudan/ Niger to Libya have been reduced but not stopped. As it is clear from the diagram below, the total arrivals to Europe has decreased by around 24% in the first half of the year 2020, compared to the same period in 2019. (IMREF 2020, 4).

Chart 3: Comparing migrant arrivals to Europe in 2019 and 2020



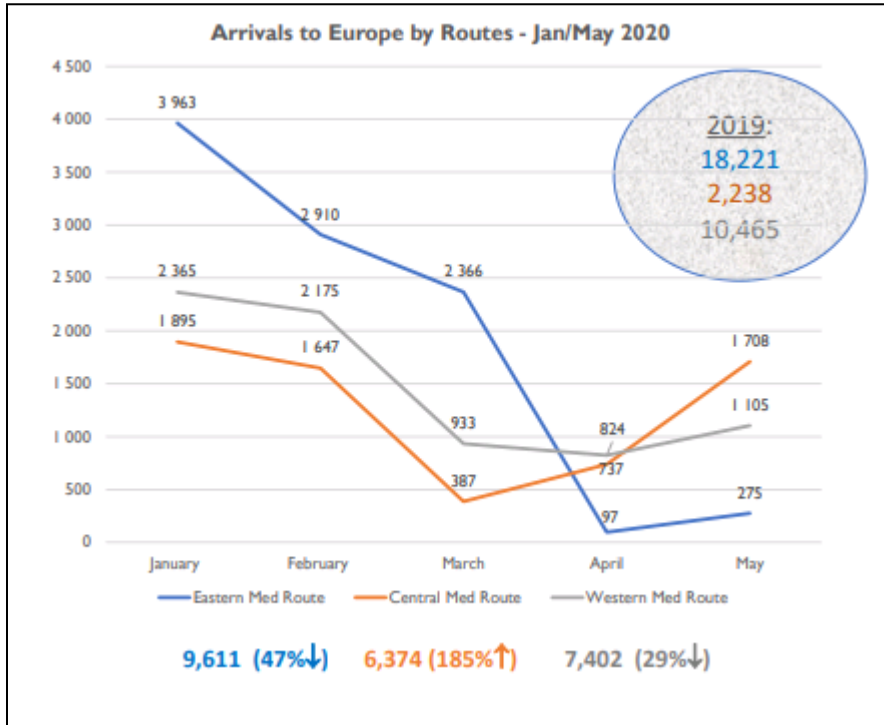
**Source:** IMREF: webinar "Evidence and trends on migrant flows along the central Mediterranean route- impact of COVID- 19 on Mobility"

<https://displacement.iom.int/reports/west-and-central-africa-%E2%80%94-covid-19-%E2%80%94-evidence-and-trends-migrant-flows-along-central>

On the other hand, movement by sea increased by 13% in the first quarter of 2020 as compared to the same period in 2019. Yet, the number of people departing from Libya between January and April 2020 increased by 290%, compared to last year, with 6629 departures. And while the sea movements to the Spanish peninsula decreased, other movements to the canary islands increased by 735%, with 1995 arrivals between January and April, including from relatively new locations like the western Sahara territory and Senegal. (UNHCR/ IOM 2020, 2). In this context, it has been observed that almost one third of all arrivals to Spain in 2020 were through the canary islands (the west African Route) during the first half of the year 2020. (IMREF 2020, 4).

In an attempt to portray the impact of COVID- 19 pandemic on migrant flows from Africa to Europe, the following diagram provides statistics about arrivals to Europe by routes. In this context, it is clear that despite the fact that recorded arrivals to Europe through both the eastern med route and the western med route have declined by 47% and 29% respectively over the first five months of 2020 compared to the same period in 2019, it is evident that the recorded arrivals to Europe via the central med route have increased by around 185% over the same period compared to 2019 statistics. (IMREF 2020, 4).

Chart 4: Arrivals to Europe by Routes from Jan to May 2020



**Source:** IMREF: webinar "Evidence and trends on migrant flows along the central Mediterranean route- impact of COVID- 19 on Mobility"

<https://displacement.iom.int/reports/west-and-central-africa-%E2%80%94-covid-19-%E2%80%94-evidence-and-trends-migrant-flows-along-central>

In addition to the above, the fear of the pandemic and the economic slowdown in Europe led to a "reverse" regular and irregular migration from Spain to Morocco. However, these reverse migration flows remain unquantified to a great extent. (The Arab weekly, 2020) if we would like to understand the obstacles that affected the mobility of individuals and groups along the central med route as a result of the pandemic, the following diagram summarizes the most important factors hindering mobility of migrants. The most important of these factors are mobility restrictions imposed by governments, and medical requirements.





their business model and diversify their offers to potential risk takers, usually through more dangerous routes. (UNHCR/ IOM 2020, 4- 6) there are indications that migrants and smugglers have taken measures to avoid COVID- 19 controls. Migrants were forced by smugglers to leave vehicles ahead of checkpoints and be picked up after the empty vehicles were checked. That's why migrants along the eastern corridor are guided by smugglers to use new routes where there are less or even no screening controls through sanaag region in Somalia, which is considered as dangerous and was usually avoided by migrants. (IOM regional office for east and horn of Africa 2020, 8)

### **5. High risks to ongoing negotiations and peace talks**

While many African peace processes were continued despite the outbreak of COVID- 19, the pandemic introduced new risks that could negatively affect fragile gains of different groups all over the continent. This is particularly significant in cases where peace or security agreements are being negotiated or in countries witnessing political transitions or peace processes such as the Central African Republic, Guinea- Bissau, Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan. The outbreak of COVID 19 has delayed the implementation of critical peace agreements. The armed group negotiation in Sudan and the implementation of the Central African Republic peace agreement have taken a backseat. Moreover, the recently established transitional governments in South Sudan and Sudan also needed diplomatic support that has been hampered by the pandemic. (Chergui 2020, 3) Similarly, all capacities for good offices, mediation, peace building and peacekeeping have been affected by the pandemic, on all levels international, regional, national or even local. Mediators had to postpone meetings and talks and cancel key diplomatic events. Within this context, several meetings and summits have been held virtually. Several processes in many cases including Central African Republic and Sudan, parties managed to switch to online discussions, which creates new opportunities in enhancing the inclusivity of peace processes, but reflects challenges related to the digital gap that may exist between urban and rural areas in terms of access to online platforms. (UN 2020, 21)

## **6. Accelerated violence by terrorist groups**

The outbreak of COVID- 19 pandemic had its implications on the activities carried out by terrorist and non- state armed groups in Africa, who started capitalizing on the pandemic to increase their attacks. Field operations by the UNHCR/ IOM observed worrying trends of violence. For instance, violent attacks in the Sahel rose by 37% between March and April 2020, and the number of IDPs in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger rose by 370,000 in March alone. (UNHCR/ IOM 2020, 2- 3) In West Africa, Boko Haram insurgents increased their attacks in Lake Chad region and launched an attack against an army base causing the death of hundreds of peacekeepers. In the horn of Africa, Al- Shabaab launched a series of attacks targeting civilians in Somalia and Kenya. Even in southern Africa, the Islamic state affiliated jihadi group increased their attacks in Mozambique and launched an unprecedented large scale assault in Cabo Delgado. These attacks had devastating humanitarian consequences, with increased IDPs and refugees. Moreover, some terrorist groups are using pandemic- related fears to expand their influence and add on the weakness of the state authorities in many countries of SSA. These groups are using social media platforms to spread misinformation and reveal the inability of states to address the needs of the people, while portraying themselves as a perfect alternative responder in an attempt to foster trust and recruit supporters for their extremist ideologies. (Chergui 2020, 3)

On the other hand, counter-terrorism operations have been negatively affected by the pandemic. As a preventive measure, critical operations and rotations have been delayed or even cancelled as military and police forces are in quarantine. Forces tasked with counter- terrorism measures are being redeployed to enforce government measures including lockdown and border security. Even the limited resources that were previously allocated for preventing and countering violent extremism are now redirected towards healthcare supplies and other humanitarian provisions. (Chergui 2020, 3)

## **7. promoting the authoritarian model of governance**

As the virus emerged in China, the Chinese government deployed all the powers of its centralized unitary decision making structure to impose a harsh lockdown in Hubei province that halted the spread of the virus across the country. China has managed to control the pandemic and is now the first country to reemerge

economically, with industrial output in April reportedly up 3.9% from a year before. Within such circumstances, the Chinese government was delivering a message to the whole world that consultative, media- obsessed democratic leadership lacks the decisiveness of its authoritarian counterpart at the time of crisis. As a result, the COVID- 19 pandemic intensified the debate whether authoritarian states are gaining the upper hand across the world, especially that the countries worst- hit by the pandemic –in terms of deaths per capita- are mostly democracies, while china has managed to contain the virus more than any other country in the world. That's why it was argued that the pandemic represented the high appeal of the authoritarian model, especially in Sub Saharan Africa. (Niblett and Vinjamuri 2020)

This authoritarian model appeals to many leaders in SSA. The Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni has adopted a militarized approach in dealing with the health crisis. At the same time he insists that his government's quick action limited the spread of the virus to only 10 community infections, with the rest of the cases imported. (Kasirye 2020)

## **VI. Challenges in managing the COVID- 19 crises:**

Despite all the efforts that have been exerted to contain the COVID- 19 pandemic in SSA, there are many challenges that undermined the attempts of the political leadership in sub- Saharan Africa to contain the negative implications of COVID- 19, especially on the political level. The following are some of the most significant challenges that are obvious in this regard.

### **1. Lack of public trust in governments**

The emergency measures and regulations that have been imposed in many African countries in response to the pandemic have also given extended powers to the executive authority, which is now enjoying even more hegemony over the other branches of government than ever before. Consequently, such measures reduced civil rights and liberties in many countries of SSA, including freedom of movement, freedom of peaceful association and assembly and freedom of belief and worship. Moreover, the lockdown of the population caused delays in voter registration in many countries; which in turn resulted in a controversy concerning the inclusivity of all citizens in upcoming elections. The deployment of the military and police to enforce rules that are inconsistent with the rights granted to people in constitutions

aroused many questions by citizens and human rights organizations. All these measures aggravated the deficit of public trust in governments and provided grounds for several protests in many countries of SSA. (IDEA 2020)

## **2. Political exploitation of the crisis**

Political exploitation of the crisis is one of the major challenges underlying African attempts to contain the pandemic. As the crisis goes on, some leaders could order restrictive measures that make public health at the peak of the crisis and then extending them, hoping to quash dissent once the disease is controlled. There are precedents from West Africa's Ebola crisis, where local civil society groups and opposition parties argue that the authorities prohibited meetings for longer than necessary to suppress legitimate protests. (ICG, March 2020, 9- 10) Similarly, governments in SSA can use health related emergency powers for other agendas of social and political control. Governments assume far reaching powers in health emergencies, within which the police obtain vast opportunities for abuse. (De Waal 2020, 6) Cases of excessive use of force by security forces and officials (either the military or the police) while enforcing the state of emergency have been documented in many countries in SSA. (UN 2020, 22)

Uganda is one of the clear examples of such political exploitation of the crisis. Despite the fact that no state of emergency has been declared, presidential speeches were declared and published as legal decrees. Besides, a number of incidents have been recorded in which undisciplined elements within the security forces were excessively using force to enforce the lockdown. Moreover, the government had turned the pandemic into a procurement exercise benefitting a small number of individuals and companies with political connections to the state. Many academics and civil society activists sent a petition demanding an explanation from the prime minister and demonstrated for a clarification from the government regarding slow distribution of food during the pandemic. Within state responses to the pandemic, all demonstrators were arrested for demonstrating against the government in this critical time. In the same vein, there were suggestions to postpone the February 2021 elections in Uganda, and president Museveni declared that there is a possibility for suspension if the pandemic doesn't show signs of easing After June 2020 (Kasirye 2020)

Ethiopia is another example where the political and security situation in the country is at risk. In an attempt to contain the pandemic, the government has postponed the national elections that were due to have been held at the end of August, and enacted a 5 month state of emergency (SOE). Under the SOE, full obedience to orders of the state is required either within the state apparatus or outside it. Within the politically volatile environment that has been prevalent in Ethiopia since 2018, there have been deep concerns that the measures taken to prevent the spread of the virus may enable the ruling party to centralize the administrative and repressive apparatuses of the government with the declared aim of combating a dangerous invisible enemy. Within these circumstances, the maintenance of political stability depends on the institutional and ideological capacity of both the ruling party and the opposition groups, together with their ability to mobilize supporters and their willingness to work together. (Yusuf 2020, 3- 7)

### **3. Governance Crisis challenge (legitimacy challenge)**

State policies in response to pandemics commonly have governance impacts that are sometimes even greater than the impact of the pandemic itself. COVID- 19 pandemic and the African legal responses to the economic crisis associated with the pandemic represent a major challenge that has the potential to cause governance crises in many countries of Sub Saharan Africa. Within the regulations of lockdowns and border- closures that were undertaken by many countries in SSA, countries dependent on commodity exports and tourism faced huge revenue losses. At the same time, as currencies depreciate, debt servicing payments become less affordable. All these economic pressures are a source that not only cause potential social unrest and conflict, but also squeeze the political budgets on which rulers rely to secure their legitimacy and political support. This can spell political crisis, especially in countries with scheduled elections in the upcoming months. More importantly, the fear of social breakdowns may cause governments to enact repressive measures to ensure regime survival. (De Waal, April 2020, 5- 8) that's why governance crisis is one of the major challenges facing African rulers in their attempts to contain the pandemic.

#### **4. Increased rumors and fake news via social media**

The outbreak of the pandemic and the legal responses undertaken by many countries to contain it led to an increase in news sharing via social media. The proliferation of media spaces and other outlets of communication -one of which is social media- by professional and non professional sources, have led to both misinformation & disinformation, with adverse consequences on the fight against the pandemic. (UNESCO 2020) This has been misused by extremist groups to share "fake news" and misinformation in a way that serves their agendas and spreads distrust in governmental authorities in Africa. In fact this fake information has the potential not only to threaten public health measures, but also to disrupt societal trust in state institutions. (Chergui 2020, 3) Moreover, disinformation and conspiracy theory, advanced via social media and other online platforms have fueled a speech of hatred against foreigners, migrants, refugees, as well as nationals returning to their home countries, and even people who test positive for the virus. (UN 2020, 23)

### **VII. Conclusion**

The outbreak of the COVID- 19 pandemic and the measures undertaken to contain it have posed major implications and threats especially in countries of SSA, where there are many resource- based conflicts and violent extremist groups capitalizing on the pandemic to maximize their profits. The COVID- 19 environment helped aggravate tensions and even the government responses to contain the pandemic were sometimes exacerbating the crisis rather than resolving it. Moreover, there are many challenges that undermine all efforts in managing the crisis, including the political exploitation of the crisis in favor of the privileged individuals and groups who want to sustain their powers and wealth at expense of other groups. Such environment helped further promote authoritarianism rather than other more democratic approaches of government, which is in itself a challenge that need to be properly addressed by all state and non state actors and political forces in SSA, if they are willing to work together to contain the pandemic while maintaining institutional powers of the state, or else an unprecedented cycle of tensions and violence would erupt in many regions of the continent.

On the other hand, the pandemic reflected the connectedness of the world. Within these circumstances there is a real need to promote multilateral approaches

for facing the repercussions of the pandemic that were catastrophic in all spheres, especially in countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. It is now more obvious than ever before that the African cooperation is crucial to contain and mitigate the impact of COVID- 19. In these uncertain times, continental cooperation platforms need to be revitalized, collectively mobilizing all efforts towards maintaining sustainable peace and combating the unprecedented implications and effects of the pandemic all over the continent.

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