The Political-Economy of Covid-19 and Security in Western Kenya

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Introduction

Over the last few months, global attention and media focus has been dominated by the devastating effects of the Covid-19 pandemic also known as coronavirus. Of importance and worth inspection is the attendant hysteria that different media platforms have instilled in the minds of audiences anchored on the severity of the disease, its mode of transmission and surging numbers of infections globally[1]. These are worrying observations for preventive and containment efforts including even treatment options, given that the disease still largely remains mysterious.

Corona Virus has been reported in nearly all countries in the world including Kenya, which reported its first case on 12th March 2020[2]. The case was a Kenyan citizen who travelled back to Nairobi returning from the United States of America via London, United Kingdom on the 5th March 2020, she was confirmed positive by the National Influenza Centre Laboratory at the National Public Health Laboratories of the Ministry of Health[3]. The patient remained clinically stable, managed at the Infectious Diseases Unit at the Kenyatta National Hospital and has been since discharged after testing negative twice.

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[1] See WHO https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/global-research-on-novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov   See also https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/724458D7503173B16E334BE5B8C19469/S1935789320000841a.pdf/covid19_from_epidemic_to_pandemic.pdf ; James J. J. COVID-19: "A Tale of Two Epidemics" March 20, 2020. Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness.: 1-3. doi:10.1017/dmp.2020.58; James J. J. Accepted Manuscript for Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness as part of the Cambridge Coronavirus Collection DOI: 10.1017/dmp.2020.84
[2] See Ministry of Health http://www.health.go.ke/first-case-of-coronavirus-disease-confirmed-in-kenya/
[3] MoE, 2020

There is no doubt that the pandemic has had far reaching social, cultural, economic, political, technological and environmental consequences on people in nearly all countries in the world. It is instructive to note that the pandemic has reached Kenya at a critical time when the country was engaged in a national dialogue of confronting its conflict dominated history through the Building Bridges Initiative[4]. What emerges is that resolving of the deep seated conflict issues cannot be delegated to any single institution (dialogue reference group)[5]. Neither can any process or initiative resolve them. This brief focuses on the consequences of Covid-19 on peace and cohesion in the Nyanza region (Western Kenya) in this context.

Main Conflict Trajectories

First, there is a direct correlation between livelihoods and conflict. The fact that Covid-19 has disrupted everyday economic activity in the region such as public transport (particularly *Boda-boda* or Motor Bikes and *Matatus* or Vans), fishing, farming, the *Jua Kali* or informal artisan sectors which are the backbone of the region's economy has deprived thousands of people of their livelihoods, making them more susceptible to crime, violence and conflict.

Secondly, there is *frozen peace* in the region– This refers to a situation where coercion is the primary means of dealing with crises and conflict[6] . Although on the surface things seem to carry on as usual, the causes (both underlying and immediate) of conflict have not been resolved and the probability for violence to erupt remains high. For precautionary measures, the government has imposed dusk to dawn curfew with harsh enforcement measures from state police, which large portions of the population perceive as a 'state of emergency', to curb behavior raising human rights concerns from civil society groups.

Consequently, the state's efforts of controlling citizen behavior remain partial and imperfect[7] . In the Nyanza region, this level of relationship (State-Society) is characterized by a one way flow of communication (orders from the government to the

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[4] See https://www.bbi.go.ke/ see also what the Task Force reports say about the essence of building bridges to a new Kenya from views of Kenyans. 'Kenyans feel Kenyan when political competition and the use of ethnicity as an organising tool are at rest between elections. Across the country, they are extremely concerned at the poor values we express as a people and a leadership crisis at multiple levels, reflected above all in the continuing elevated levels of corruption. Kenyans are tired of elections that bring the economy to a standstill every few years and feel that politics has become too adversarial while trying to entrench itself in every facet of their waking lives. They would like a more stable and predictable politics that is democratic and produces governance at the National and County levels that is inclusive of our ethnic, religious, and regional diversity.' Retrieved 08th April 2020 from https://d2s5ggbxczybtf.cloudfront.net/bbireport.pdf

[5] .Dialogue Reference Group. County dialogue conference booklet, p.8

[6] Johan Galtung is widely considered as the father of peacebuilding
   Frozen peace refers to a situation where coercive instruments of the state are used to enforce peace through deterrent use or threat of force

[7] Marie- Aude Fouere (Ed) Remembering Nyerere in Tanzania.p.17

population and use of force to enforce State directives, as seen in Kisumu and Migori counties), resistance by sections of the population to comply, and very little evidence to suggest cooperation or public participation to achieve desired results should therefore not surprise anyone.

Thirdly, in the event of a total or partial lockdown, there is likely to emerge class division and conflict. Majority of the population are working in the informal sector (Jua Kali), which is characterized by daily or weekly income streams. This segment of the population has little or no savings and may not have the capacity to stockpile enough food, medical and energy supplies to see them through a prolonged period of economic inactivity. In the event of such an eventuality, some of them will target more affluent members of the society to access supplies, with the potential for violence.

Fourthly, the region is a net importer of food. Food prices are already increasing. 2Kg tin of maize is now 150 Ksh in Kisumu and Ksh100 in Migori, up from 70 Ksh and 40 Ksh respectively 3 weeks ago. Other commodities such as eggs, vegetables and milk have also seen their prices skyrocket. Should the situation persist, amid dwindling resources, the region is likely to experience food riots, looting and violence.

In addition, there are inescapable and unforeseeable factors such as the unclear role of the civil society, the significance of new and emerging actors – social actors such as the middle class, the business community and institutional actors such as the police and health workers, mainstream and social media – and lastly, the institutional capacity of the government, through its various ministries and security organs to manage a pandemic of large magnitude[8]. The country has been through crises such as the Mau Mau[9] insurgency, flooding, drought and election related conflicts to mention but a few. The number of casualties in the Nyanza region has been high, especially with regard to election related conflicts. Can Kenyans, particularly western region go through this health crisis peacefully?

Another important issue to consider is cultural disruption. The region has highly entrenched traditions and customs regarding death and burial. The S.M Otieno burial saga is well documented[10]. In case of a pandemic, with many people dying as has been witnessed in China, Spain, Italy and the USA, the state has already enforced strict funeral and burial measures that mandates those dead to be buried within 24 hours in

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[8] Ndeda,M, et al (ed) Kenya's past as Prologue. P8
[9] This was a movement and an uprising masterminded by Africans in Kenya in the 1960's who were agitating for independence from the British. See Wa-Githumo, M. 1991.The Truth about Mau Mau Movement –
The Most Popular Uprising in Kenya. *Trans African Journal of History*.
[10] See Van Doren, J. 1988 'Death the African Style": The Case of S. M Otieno. *The American Journal of Comparative Law*. Vol 36, No. 2. pp. 329-350.

the presence of not more than 15 relatives[11]. Will the community accept these measures, for example if their loved ones are to be buried in Nairobi, Mombasa and other far flung areas as opposed to their ancestral land?

Another dimension worth highlighting is the role of the political class, particularly the County governments, elected leaders and political party leaders and officials in Covid-19 response in the region. Already, social media is awash with reports of ambivalent response mechanisms and arbitrary directives such as closure of markets without use of clear channels of decision making and communication which do not help the situation. County assemblies remain largely unresponsive and most leaders are either silent, or engaging in risky endeavors such as distribution of relief food.

Finally, prolonged restriction of human movement could have far reaching effects on trust and social relations at family, community, local and national levels. Previously homogenous families and societies might be forced to cohabit and relate with strangers and minorities (as witnessed with returnees quarantined upon arrival by the government). In addition, communities that were at peace with each other, those with close cultural, social and political ties, or trading with each other might abandon such relationships and forge new relationships. Community members with deviant behaviors, for example released prisoners might also face challenges of reintegration. On the flip side, new social relations can emerge that redefine the nature of community. In such a scenario, communities will develop resilience and copying mechanisms where the most proactive and resilient members of the society thrive, as those who are resistant to change stagnate (survival for the fittest). This is likely to undermine pillars of peacebuilding such as peace committees, councils of elders and religious institutions.

Others factors that could lead to escalation of conflict include increase in crime[12], especially during night curfews, unethical business practices such as hoarding and manipulation of prices of essential commodities like food, safety products like sanitizers and masks, and medical supplies, inadequate medical facilities, domestic violence, escalation of gender based violence, stress and psychosocial illnesses. Others include children being susceptible to defilement, pornography, and child trafficking, alcohol and drug abuse.

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[11] Njeru, Bo. 2020. Government Order: Kenya Covid 19 Victims Must be Buried within 24 Hours after Death. See https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2001366990/coronavirus-victims-to-be-buried-within-24-hours

[12] Ochieng, J. 2020. Curfew: Kisumu Police Accused of Colluding with Criminals. Daily Nation Retrieved 09th April 2020 from https://www.nation.co.ke/counties/kisumu/police-accused-of-colluding-with-criminals/1954182-5514166-7cair0/index.html

Policy Recommendations

For the Kenyan Government

1. Establish county and cross county Covid-19 conflict early-warning early-response platforms for information sharing and response. (Can be SMS based, toll free or internet based, using social media)
2. Introduce wellness programs for police officers, CSO actors and security sector actors
3. Protection and enhancement of human rights for patients, care givers, enforcement agencies and the media

For Kenyan politicians

1. Politicians should avoid politicizing COVID 19 through relief food distributions
2. Politicians should avoid ambivalent response mechanisms and arbitrary directives such as closure of essential services such as markets without use of clear channels of decision making and communication
3. Members of County Assemblies must be responsive through virtual communication to assure citizens of the measures, including legislative, that they have put in place to combat the outbreak

Civil Society

1. Pay more attention to the manifested aspects of Covid-19 related conflicts, and turn people's attention away from traditional conflicts such as the animosity between neighboring communities like the Luo/Nandi and Kipsigis, and stock theft, political rivalry and resource based conflicts
2. Resilience building among communities considering the fact that each community has its own traditional methods of resilience building. Facilitate them to identify these resiliencies and use them for survival and conflict mitigation
3. Lobby county governments and donors to allocate resources for Covid-19 related conflict mitigation measures
4. Sensitize the public against domestic violence in the context of government lockdown measures

Public Higher Educational Institutions, Mainstream and Social Media

1. Support curriculums development in Peace Journalism and Media and Security

2. Mainstream and social media should practice Peace Journalism to avoid sensationalizing news on Covid-19[13]
3. Conflict sensitive and do no harm sensitization for health workers, police officers, national administration and peace practitioners
4. Use social media to fight misrepresentation, misinformation, disinformation and fake news on Covid-19

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[13] See the Peace Journalist article on covering Covid-19 on The Peace Journalist Magazine by Steve Youngblood (2020) retrieved 0th April 2020 from https://www.park.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Peace-Journalist-Apr-2020-web.pdf

Research Topics at Frontiers: "Myths, Misconceptions and Politics of Covid-19 on Social Media Platforms" by *Frontiers Journal of Communication.*

Center for Media, Democracy, Peace & Security

Is a Policy Think Tank in Rongo University, Kenya designed to conduct high quality research in media, democracy, peace and security and generate knowledge consistent with Rongo University vision of nurturing research, innovation and outreach initiatives for the betterment of communities both locally, nationally and internationally. The university supports the center in playing a significant role of research, innovation and community outreach. The Center **(CMDPS)** calls for a uniquely African methodologies and philosophies of representation and mediation inspired by Africanism fused with international elements to sync with Western and other modes of expectations. It is envisioned that research projects from the Center will help influence policy issues on media, democracy, peace and security in Kenya, East Africa, Africa and beyond.

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