



HOW THE
PANDEMIC
EXACERBATED
SOCIAL
PROBLEMS IN
COUNTRIES
EXPERIENCING
CIVIL UNREST

*BY LICA
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*THE CRISES
BEFORE
COVID-19*

2019 WAS A YEAR OF SIGNIFICANT UPHEAVAL,

with over 25% of countries experiencing an increase in civil unrest. One region that particularly endured an uptick in disturbances was Latin America. At the core of these crises were unresolved institutional questions relating to democracy and economic welfare. Civil discord, however, was certainly not limited to one continent. Countries that have experienced years of periodical disorder, such as Hong Kong, had significant escalations in the scale and character of the protests. The Hong Kong crisis resembles Latin American unrest in that questions of democracy and government legitimacy were at the core of protests in both cases. Yet all these instances of turmoil fall short of all-out civil war, which Syria, for example, has struggled with for years, as the government has proved wholly unable to exert control over the territory. At the end of 2019, these countries were ill-prepared to address the everyday problems of their citizenry, much less the challenges of a pandemic.

An analysis of these countries' response to COVID-19 reveals two trends. First, the economic toll of COVID-19 and government mismanagement of the disease often exacerbated popular grievances, further eroding government legitimacy. Second, many countries where democracy was already threatened prior to the pandemic took advantage of their populations' reduced ability to organize and systematically resist state authority to consolidate power, often dismantling existing checks to executive power and persecuting the opposition. These somewhat contradictory trends of decreased legitimacy and increased authoritarianism set the stage for renewed and intensified civil conflict in the aftermath of the health crisis.

In Latin America, popular anger prior to COVID-19 focused primarily on questions regarding the legitimacy of governments and their inability to provide

basic economic well-being to their citizenry. In Venezuela, President Nicolas Maduro's presidency has been characterized by "assassinations, torture and sexual abuse of political prisoners, violent censorship of the press, and a sociopathic strategy to use the hunger of its own citizens as a tool for political control." Maduro's legitimacy is so disputed that over 50 countries recognize Juan Guaido, the leader of the opposition-dominated National Assembly, as president, rather than Maduro. Maduro's support comes not from the people, whose election of opposition parties to the National Assembly was bypassed by a competing legislative body full of Maduro loyalists, but from the military, Russia, and China. Moreover, Venezuela has been in a state of severe economic crisis since 2014, with food shortages so severe that over 4.8 million people have left the country. Ecuador provides a less stark, but still illustrative example of popular unrest in Latin America. Last year, President Lenin Moreno's decision to end fuel subsidies following an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) led to popular protests that forced the government to temporarily flee Quito. Underlying the protests are longstanding ethnic and class tensions, as indigenous groups have been particularly affected by Moreno's policies, and especially benefited from former president Correa's left wing social programs. The severe clashes between indigenous groups, transport workers, the working class, and government forces only ended once the fuel subsidies were restored.

A common thread in countries that experienced strife in 2019 has been their subsequent mishandling of the current health crisis. This has had a severe effect on government legitimacy, entrenching negative popular opinions. In many places, existing grievances contributed to government failures, such as in Venezuela where many families lack running water. Lack of access to basic sanitation poses a nearly insurmountable challenge to establishing the sanitary precautions needed to combat the spread of the virus. Although the government claims it has extensive coronavirus testing available and that the curve is steady, these claims bear "little relation" to the experience of many health workers, who say "the nation's rickety health care system, where some hospitals lack basics like soap and running water, is ill-prepared to confront the deadly pandemic." The

existing health crisis, coupled with Venezuela's years-long problem with rampant inflation, has led the World Health Programme to warn Venezuelan authorities of the potential risk of famine. It is worth noting how contradictions between Maduro's government reports and the perceptions of segments of civil society, especially healthcare workers, play into a larger narrative in Venezuela. Maduro's government is considered untrustworthy by two thirds of the population, and his denial of the crisis in Venezuela may well reinforce that perception. The contrast between what the government says and what the people experience is rendered sharper due to the crisis. In Ecuador, "the hospital system collapsed" and several officials and businessmen are accused of price-gouging "hospitals and governments for medical supplies, including masks, sanitizer and ventilators." This reinforced public perceptions of government corruption, and "prosecutors in Ecuador announced they had identified a criminal ring that had colluded with health officials to win a contract selling body bags to hospitals at 13 times the real price."

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Similarly in Hong Kong, the coronavirus outbreak strengthened popular conviction that the Hong Kong government had little regard for its people and prioritized Chinese interests. In particular, many in Hong Kong felt deeply betrayed by Carrie Lam, the Hong Kong Chief Executive sympathetic to Beijing, who refused to close the border in China until community transmissions were already well underway in Hong Kong. This almost symbolic resistance to cutting ties with the mainland when it was necessary to protect the people of Hong Kong, succinctly illustrated what many in Hong Kong long accused Lam of: being loyal to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rather than her constituents.

While in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Hong Kong, a lack of state capacity and pandemic mismanagement pose a threat to state legitimacy, in Syria they have the opposite effect. In fact, Bashar Al-Assad, the Syrian dictator whose brutality plunged the country into an ongoing civil war in 2011, has taken active steps to curtail the ability of the provisional government in rebel-held territories to respond

to this crisis. Bashar Al-Assad has managed to institute a long-term policy that targets and punishes civilians in those territories: his government "has blocked humanitarian aid, besieged civilian areas, and bombed aid convoys." Now, he seeks to similarly weaponize coronavirus. Assad has endeavored to conduct what can only be described as biological warfare, as "his government undermined the ability of rival authorities in the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) to stem the spread of COVID-19." Bashar Al-Assad systematically curtailed the SDC's pandemic prevention capabilities by insisting "that all samples for COVID-19 from the northeast be transported to Damascus to be tested in government labs" and then, when tests confirmed a man "from the area had died from the virus...the government prevented the World Health Organization (WHO) from telling the SDC that the pandemic had reached the northeast for 11 days." Further, Assad obstructed attempts by the WHO "to build its capacity in northeast Syria, where just 26 of 279 public health centers are functioning for a population of 4 million." Bashar Al-Assad's strategy has been to leave the rebel government utterly unable to counter the health crisis, in order to present itself as the only viable governing authority.

The difference between Syria and the other countries discussed is that in Syria, the central government needs to meet a relative, rather than an absolute, standard of state capacity: it does not need to address COVID-19 well, just better than the flailing governments of the rebel controlled territories. While effective as a war strategy, Al-Assad's policy nevertheless erodes popular trust, as the government not only neglects civilian welfare but actively hinders the people's ability to protect themselves from COVID-19. While in the short term, the rebel territories may fall to government troops, with people desperately fleeing to the relative safety of the government-held areas and few healthy men left to fight, in the long term Al-Assad is reinforcing his image as a brutal, predatory ruler. Much as in Venezuela, Ecuador and Hong Kong, the people, though they may flock to Al-Assad in desperation in the short term, are unlikely to forget that their health is not his government's priority.

Syria's example is not only dire because of the pressing humanitarian threat that the disease poses, but also because it reveals Bashar Al-Assad's weaponization of the pandemic. He is leveraging the well-being of his citizens in order to weaken the rebel government. This might not be surprising, coming from a man who has used chemical weapons against his people, though it is certainly horrifying. However, Al-Assad is not the only leader to use the health crisis as a tool to further his authoritarian designs. While unable to effectively contain the COVID-19 crisis, many countries that experienced serious upheaval prior to the pandemic have used the health crisis to systematically crack down on political opponents and consolidate power. In Hong Kong, protests decreased once the crisis began in January, but in March, support for the protests remained high, at 58 percent. However, COVID-19 did allow the CCP to rid itself of some of the international pressure that had contributed to constraining their response to the crisis, arresting 15 prominent pro-democracy leaders in April. China has also since moved forward with a proposal for a law that would allow the CCP to supervise how Hong Kong police deal with subversive activity—a clear step towards full CCP control of Hong Kong. Chinese ambitions in Hong Kong have been clear for a long time, so much so that Hong Kong protests for universal suffrage and against central government influence have been recurrent since 2003.

However, the coronavirus dealt a perhaps fatal blow to the citizenry's ability to organize and resist Chinese encroachment, provided the government with the perfect opportunity to arrest protest leaders without serious repercussions, and deviated public attention, thus allowing China to act out with relatively little international backlash. Similarly, in Venezuela, Maduro has used lockdown to undertake a series of political maneuvers in order to consolidate his power within key institutions without fear of widespread protests. Venezuela's pro-Maduro Supreme Court announced new members to the Electoral Council, a committee of five who organize the elections in Venezuela, although this is an explicit violation of the Venezuelan constitution, which states that it is the opposition-controlled General Assembly that names members to the council. Furthermore, the Supreme Court suspended the leaders of Venezuela's two largest op-

position parties from their party leadership positions, stating that two pro-Maduro congressmen must take the positions instead.

Ecuador, notably, does not adhere to this trend. Although organized protests have been impossible due to lockdowns, President Moreno has not taken advantage of this organizational barrier to encroach on popular liberties. Corruption cases are being investigated, and key figures in the corruption schemes have been arrested. Perhaps even more interesting is Ecuador's degree of institutional continuity: when a debate emerged on possibly moving the presidential elections to a later date, the electoral tribunal decided against it, as delayed elections would allow insufficient time to resolve electoral disputes before the inauguration day. This reveals the strength of Ecuador's democratic institutions, which, despite the crisis, have continued to fulfill their roles of checks and balances without executive interference. Ecuador is different from Hong Kong, Syria, or even its neighbor Venezuela, and the reason seems to be that despite the unrest it experienced in 2019 and the government's alleged excessive use of force against protestors, lack of democratic legitimacy was not a prominent issue. While corruption remains a serious threat to popular trust in the government, existing institutions remain robust, democratic safeguards. Thus, while the country remains politically unstable and suffers from low state capacity, future violence is unlikely.

As mass movements and organizations are curtailed by social distancing, fear of the disease, and lockdowns, governments in Venezuela, Ecuador, Hong Kong, and Syria experience a temporary reprieve from popular protests. Yet, the way in which these countries have dealt with the coronavirus seems to reaffirm the population's anger at the government, and further erode government legitimacy. A concerning trend also emerges among the authoritarian countries discussed here. In countries where democratic shortcomings were a key grievance, the coronavirus pandemic has offered a new opportunity to repress the opposition and dismantle constitutional safeguards. In the long term, reinvigorated popular demands will likely come to a head against increased government efforts to quell opposition. After the pandemic, unrest and repression will likely follow.