

FUTURE PANDEMICS AND ELECTIONS

Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Central African Republic, Ghana, Kenya and Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

Pandemics and other health crises are predicted to become more common in the future. This is likely to pose a variety of threats to electoral integrity. This article argues that, by learning lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, the negative impacts on elections of viral outbreaks and other emergencies can be mitigated in the future. It will begin by reviewing academic and grey literature on COVID-19 and elections, before presenting research findings from case study elections in Tanzania, Ghana, the Central African Republic, and Kenya. The article will highlight specific challenges facing low- and middle-income countries and argue that the protocols that were introduced in these case study countries ultimately failed to adequately ensure the safety of voters and election administrators by not addressing issues of compliance and enforcement. It will then present: 1) recommendations designed to be implemented in advance of future health crises, and 2) measures that should be taken once such emergencies are underway.

Keywords: COVID-19, future pandemics, election preparations, emergencies, mitigation measures

INTRODUCTION

Although much media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted its 'unprecedented' nature, epidemic diseases have broken out periodically throughout human history (de Waal 2021). Indeed, between 2016 and 2018, 41 out of the 47 countries in the World Health Organization's Africa region had at least one epidemic (Talisuna et al. 2020). Of these, 21 experienced at least one epidemic per year during that period (ibid., p. 7). Furthermore, as John Nkengasong (2021) of

the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention has argued, 'COVID-19 will not be the final pandemic to challenge the world'. Therefore, it is imperative that planning occurs to ensure greater preparedness for the next outbreak, particularly as scientists have warned that pandemics are likely to be more frequent in the future as a result of the environmental damage caused by human activity (Settele et al. 2020). At a smaller scale, viral outbreaks that lead to health crises are also likely to become more common at the regional, national, and subnational levels. Beyond health crises, the COVID-19 emergency has acted as a reminder of the need to prepare for other possible unexpected disruptions. Such emergencies may arise due to, *inter alia*, natural disasters, extreme weather events, and conflicts.

This article will focus on the preparation that is required to address election-related issues during a future pandemic or other health crisis. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948, Article 21.3) outlines a crucial role for regular elections in providing political rights: 'The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.' Citizens' rights and states' obligations are further expanded in various United Nations and regional instruments.

However, as this article will argue, evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that viral outbreaks can directly interfere with elections by exposing voters, administrators, and candidates to additional risks of viral transmission. These risks can lead to the postponement or cancellation of elections. In some cases, safety concerns may be used as a pretext by incumbent governments wishing to alter electoral calendars for other reasons. Restrictions that are introduced to mitigate viral outbreaks can also limit citizens' ability to freely participate in political processes. Indeed, such measures can be used instrumentally by governments wishing to constrain the activities of opposition parties and their supporters.

This article argues that, by learning lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, the negative impacts of viral outbreaks on electoral integrity can be mitigated in the future. It will begin by reviewing recommendations for holding elections during COVID-19 that were produced early in the pandemic, after which attention is turned to academic literature that investigates the impact COVID-19 had on electoral integrity. This review will highlight common ways in which risks of viral transmission were not adequately addressed during elections, and detail how political freedoms were often curtailed by the mitigation measures that were introduced. We will then present evidence from our research on four case study elections that took place in Africa during the pandemic: national elections in Tanzania (October 2020), Ghana (December 2020), and the Central African

Republic (December 2020), as well as by-elections in Kenya (March 2021). We argue that, except for Tanzania, the mitigation measures created for the elections in these countries tended to be sensible in theory. However, in practice, we observed that many of them were frequently ignored.

Contrary to the expectations expressed in much of the literature, we found little evidence of pandemic protocols being used instrumentally for political gain in our case study countries. Our data also describes a mixed picture regarding the pandemic's impact on political participation. Based on these findings, the article will then present recommendations for holding elections during future pandemics and other health crises. It will note that several of these recommendations are also helpful in addressing other types of emergencies. Although they are based exclusively on findings from African elections, the recommendations are relevant to other regions, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). The recommendations presented here first appeared as part of a broader set in a briefing paper that we produced in partnership with The Westminster Foundation for Democracy during September 2021 (Macdonald & Molony 2021).

Sets of similar recommendations have subsequently appeared in other publications, most notably in an analysis produced by International IDEA and The Electoral Integrity Project (James et al. (eds.), 2023).

ELECTIONS AND COVID-19 TRANSMISSION

Viral outbreaks create clear health risks to people participating in elections due to the additional opportunities they create for viral transmission. These can affect anyone involved in the electoral process in any capacity, including voters, electoral management body (EMB) staff, and politicians.¹ In a study conducted in Liberia during the Ebola outbreak, The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (2020, p. 10) found that there are more than 40 stages during the electoral cycle where people assemble or objects are transferred. Early in the pandemic, several sets of recommendations were created for mitigating the specific public health risks that were created by holding elections. The IFES (2020) recommendations are among the most comprehensive. By splitting elections into their component parts, they systematically provide recommendations that address pre-electoral activities, election-day, and post-electoral processes. The recommendations, shaped by a strong scientific understanding of how COVID-19 is transmitted, were updated as knowledge about this evolved during the pandemic.

Another set of good quality recommendations came from a group of researchers working under the auspices of The British Academy (Birch et al. 2020).

1 Evidence from the African context suggests that senior political figures may have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 due to the nature of their work (Falisse et al., 2021).

They produced recommendations addressing electoral administration, polling, administrative collaboration, election observation, and the risk of violence. Other sets of recommendations focused on specific elections (The Brennan Center for Justice 2020) or were limited to single aspects of the electoral process (The Centers of Disease Control and Prevention 2020).

Due to their timing, these recommendations were unable to draw on evidence from research conducted in the context of COVID-19. As a result, they have little to say about how successfully mitigation measures are implemented in practice. Indeed, the British Academy researchers do not discuss the issue of compliance, while the IFES researchers do not offer much detail concerning the enforcement of their proposed measures. Subsequent evidence from election observation reports suggests that, in some countries, 'restrictions were often not consistently respected and poorly enforced' (Asplund et al. 2021). Furthermore, both the IFES and British Academy recommendations tend to propose universal solutions that do not always consider the specific social and economic challenges of LMICs. Several of the suggested measures involve additional expenses that might prove prohibitive in these contexts, while others assume the existence of infrastructure that is not necessarily present. Some recommendations that are more specifically tailored to LMIC contexts were produced, including some Africa-specific ones from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (Devermont 2020). However, these tended to be less detailed than those produced by IFES and The British Academy.

It is challenging to determine if elections held during the pandemic ultimately led to increased viral transmission. COVID-19 data can present an incomplete picture and it is difficult to isolate the contribution of elections to infection rates. The academic studies on this topic provide mixed findings. Some find that elections are associated with increased COVID-19 rates, for example, Cotti et al.'s study of the Wisconsin Primary in the United States (2020), and the 2022 study by Palguta et al. of local elections in Czechia. Meanwhile, others found little impact, for example Kim et al.'s study of the National Assembly elections in South Korea (2020), and a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report (Paradis et al. 2020), which also relates to the Wisconsin Primary. Further complicating the picture is a study of the French municipal elections by Guilhem Cassan and Marc Sangnier (2022), which found significant sub-national variance. In none of the four case study countries discussed below was the COVID-19 data sufficiently comprehensive to attempt to gauge the impact of our case study elections on infection rates.

COVID-19 AND ELECTORAL INTEGRITY

The emerging literature on COVID-19 highlights several ways in which viral

outbreaks can impact electoral integrity. This is perhaps most obvious in cases when elections did not occur as scheduled. Data collected by International IDEA (Asplund (ed.) 2023) shows that between 21 February 2020 and 21 February 2022, 'at least 80 countries and territories across the globe have decided to postpone national and subnational elections due to COVID-19, out of which at least 42 countries and territories have decided to postpone national elections and referendums'. These postponements occurred disproportionately before June 2020, when there was still uncertainty about COVID-19's modes of transmission. As Toby James and Sead Alihodzic (2020) have argued, postponements in emergency situations can promote adherence to several democratic principles, by ensuring better electoral management and creating more opportunities for deliberation while also creating conditions for more equal contestation and participation.

However, attempts to reschedule elections can create legal difficulties. As Katherine Ellena (2020, p. 3) notes, 'election postponements may not be clearly provided for or even contemplated in the law, making the decision to delay or cancel an election complex'. This was seen in the case of South Africa, where multiple court cases and an official inquiry were required to determine if it was constitutional to delay the local government elections that were scheduled for October 2021 (Electoral Commission of South Africa, 2021). There is also a danger that postponements create political problems in situations where incumbents either use emergencies as a pretext for postponing elections when seeking political advantages, or face allegations that they have partisan motives (James & Alihodzic 2020, p. 356). These dynamics have been apparent in Ethiopia, where the postponement of presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for August 2020 has been described by Hala Thabet (2021, p. 256) as part of a broader process in which 'the ruling government has used the international health, economic, and security threat of COVID-19 to justify its perpetual control of power thus causing a setback on the democratization process'.

Another way in which electoral integrity can be impacted is by reducing political participation. The specific issue of turnout on election day – a point of particular concern due to fears that eligible voters might abstain from voting due to the risk of contracting COVID-19 – has been addressed by several academic case studies. However, they do not return consistent findings. For example, Dulani et al.'s study of Malawi's 2020 presidential elections (2021, p. 56) concludes that COVID-19 had 'little to no effect on either abstention or vote choice', while a study on the same elections by Chirwa et al. (2020, p. 409) finds that 'voter turnout may have been highly affected by the perceived risk of catching COVID-19'. Other examples of studies that found a link between COVID-19 and low turnout include Matteo Picchio and Raffaella Santolini's (2022) analysis of local government elections in Italy, and Martin Oswald's (2022, p. 40) evaluation of the 2021 Ugandan

elections. Although turnout can vary for a range of reasons, it is perhaps telling that data collected by International IDEA (Asplund (ed.) 2023) shows that turnout was lower than during previous iterations in 66 per cent of countries holding elections in 2020 and 2021.

When looking at the electoral process more broadly, the pandemic created a range of new risks that carried the potential to undermine political participation (Landman & Splendore, 2020). Some of these relate to health risks increasing the perceived costs of citizen involvement in certain parts of elections, for example, in political campaigns. However, the emergent literature has tended to focus more on the impact of COVID-19 mitigation measures. As Alessandra Spadaro (2020) has argued, measures designed to protect public health can have a negative impact on political rights, particularly as they can be abused. As states began to respond to COVID-19, this created a 'tenuous balance between democracy and human security' (Matlosa 2021, p. 1). COVID-19 measures have been used in some countries to constrain opposition activity. For example, Oswald (2022) details incidences of the arbitrary detention of opposition candidates in Uganda, which were justified with reference to COVID-19 protocols. In other cases, measures to mitigate the pandemic were used to limit citizens' political expression. For instance, Sammy Badran and Brian Turnbull's (2022) study of Egypt and Morocco argues that, by going beyond World Health Organization advice, these countries' COVID-19 measures were designed to curb popular dissent. It should, however, be noted that resistance to and circumvention of government COVID-19 restrictions also emerged (Bashizi et al. 2021).

METHODOLOGY

The research for this article was conducted as part of the UKRI GCRF/Newton Fund 'African Elections during the COVID-19 Pandemic' project,² which was designed to offer evidence-based, context-specific recommendations tailored to making African elections during the pandemic safer. The project is a collaboration between researchers from the University of Edinburgh, the Open University of Tanzania, the Ghana Centre for Democratic Development, and the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (HHI, who work with the NGO Echelle). We followed each stage of three national elections that occurred towards the end of 2020: in Tanzania, Ghana, and the Central African Republic (CAR). This involved a convergent mixed-methods study design that included nationally representative population-based surveys on a range of COVID-19-related attitudes and experiences, observation of the electoral process, and qualitative interviews with government

2 For further details see <https://aecp.sps.ed.ac.uk/>

employees, political parties, civil society actors and EMB staff. The project followed all the stages of our case study elections, including voter registration, party nominations, campaigns, voter education, election day activities, tallying, and the announcement of results. We also conducted qualitative research during Kenya's March 2021 by-elections, with a focus on EMB mitigation measures and the level of adherence to them during polling and tallying.

FINDINGS FROM CASE STUDY COUNTRIES

Delays and Postponements

The national elections, including pre-election voter registration activities, took place as planned in all three case study countries. There had been considerable discussion in the media and on social media regarding the constitutional possibility of postponing the elections in Ghana, but neither the political parties nor the EMB felt this was required (Nugent et al., p. 4). In CAR, the elections were conducted at a time when large parts of the country were controlled by armed groups, and insecurity and internal displacement were of greater concern to many citizens than COVID-19 (Magbe et al. 2021, pp. 7 & 10). A coalition of armed groups asked for the elections to be postponed for reasons unrelated to the pandemic but the request was denied, and voting went ahead as planned in 118 of the 140 constituencies (ibid., p. 7). In Tanzania, any chances of the elections being postponed were removed when, five months before the elections, President Magufuli (falsely) announced that the virus had been eliminated from the country (Macdonald et al. 2023). Although some Kenyan by-elections had been delayed due to COVID-19 during 2020, those scheduled for March 2021 went ahead with minimal discussion of postponement.

Mitigation Measures

In Tanzania, the EMB initially applied some COVID-19 mitigation measures during the voter registration process; but, following Magufuli's announcement claiming that the virus had been eliminated from the country, the remainder of Tanzania's elections took place with little to no public health precautions in place (Lihiru et al., p. 11). Aside from Tanzania, mitigation measures in the case study countries tended to be sensible in theory. A range of standard health directives designed to apply to everyday life were issued in Ghana, CAR and Kenya during each country's pre-election period. These included common measures such as requirements to wear facemasks in certain circumstances, the provision of public handwashing facilities, and requests that citizens maintain social distance

(Nugent et al. 2021, p. 1; Magbe et al. 2021, pp. 3-4). These general restrictions offered no exemptions for campaign activities such as rallies and canvassing and should, therefore, have been applied (Nugent et al. 2021, p. 1; Molony 2021, p. 5). For election day, the EMBs in these three countries introduced additional and more specific COVID-19 protocols. They were reasonably similar, with voters in each country being required to socially distance at polling stations, wash their hands before entering, and wear facemasks. Voters in Ghana and Kenya were additionally tested with a non-contact thermo-gun before they were allowed to enter polling stations. Ghana also created some additional polling stations to allow for greater social distancing during voting and counting (Nugent et al. 2021, p. 5). In CAR, instructions on the voting procedure were adapted to include mitigation measures. However, in both Ghana and Kenya, information on the voting process remained divorced from messaging about the COVID-19 protocols that had been introduced. Part of the issue was that neither country's EMB had a budget for adjusting training manuals and demonstration materials (CAR's EMB had access to funds from a UNDP Election Support basket).

Limits to Feasible Mitigation Measures

These case study countries provide useful illustrations of why solutions suggested in international recommendations are not always appropriate in LMICs. In all four countries, the EMBs are chronically under-resourced, meaning that some recommendations are simply too costly to implement. Many of the recommendations also rely on the presence of an infrastructure that is generally not available. For example, mail-in balloting is not viable in countries, such as these, which do not have reliable postal services. The virtual training of election officials is not possible in those locations, including the rural areas in these countries, where appropriate equipment and software are not available, and internet coverage is poor. Large structures that allow for adequate social distancing were simply not available in many constituencies in these countries, with cramped primary school classrooms often representing the only communal buildings available for use as polling stations. Extending polling hours would also have been problematic in the case study countries, due to the limited availability of good quality artificial lighting and the power sources required to run it.

Compliance with Measures

In all four countries, the intensity of campaigning increased in the run-up to election day (although, in CAR, the violence restricted some campaign activities). We observed generally poor levels of compliance with COVID-19 mitigation

measures during campaigning in the three case study countries where they were in place. For example, in Ghana, social distancing was disregarded and facemasks were removed during 'health walks' led by party officials (*ibid.*, p. 6). Politicians in CAR and Kenya also contributed to a culture of non-compliance by campaigning without facemasks during huge gatherings where social distancing was almost impossible (Magbe et al., p. 11; Molony 2021, p. 5; Lihiru et al. 2021, p. 11). In all four countries, some voters travelled to both register and cast votes in areas other than where they currently reside. This created additional risks, as mitigation measures were not always observed during these journeys, which often took place on public transport.

On election day, the enforcement of COVID-19 mitigation measures appears to have been particularly weak in CAR (and perhaps non-existent outside Bangui, the capital). There were also significant lapses in the observance of EMB protocols in Ghana and Kenya (Nugent et al. 2021, pp. 6-10; Molony 2021, pp. 6-12). Polling station staff generally did well in enforcing facemask mandates, although they were frequently worn in a way that did not sufficiently cover the nose and mouth. Where temperature screening using a no-contact thermo-gun was required, this was less rigorously enforced. Social distancing in Ghana was relatively well observed when voters were within the bounds of the polling stations but not when they were in the initial queue to enter the polling locations. There was almost no respect for social distancing at any point during Kenya's by-elections, nor in CAR, where the requirements to wash hands and wear facemasks were generally ignored (Molony 2021, pp. 9-10; Magbe et al. 2021, p. 8). In both Ghana and Kenya, the biometric devices used to identify voters by a fingerprint scan were not always regularly sanitised (Nugent et al. 2021, p. 4 & p. 10). The conditions for polling staff were particularly challenging in all cases, as they came into frequent contact with communal materials and often found wearing protective equipment for many hours challenging in often hot and cramped conditions (*ibid.*, p. 10).

Impact of COVID-19 on Political Participation

The surveys we ran in Tanzania, Ghana and CAR revealed a mixed picture regarding the impact of COVID-19 on political participation. In both Tanzania and Ghana, we contracted IPSOS to run nationally representative surveys in both the pre- and post-election periods, during which respondents were asked a range of questions designed to address whether the pandemic was dissuading them from participating in various aspects of the political process. In Tanzania, the number of respondents expressing concerns relating to COVID-19 was very low across the board. When, in the pre-election surveys, we asked Tanzanian respondents if they thought certain stages in the electoral process were likely to be safe, very

few of them expressed concerns relating to COVID-19. The part of the electoral process during which the pandemic was creating the most concern was queuing at the polling station, but only nine of 1 511 respondents mentioned this. In the post-election surveys, we asked questions relating to participation in different parts of the recently concluded elections. Again, the Tanzanian respondents reported few COVID-19 related concerns, with only five of 1 506 respondents giving it as a reason why they had not attended a rally, while none said it had prevented them from voting. In Ghana, the level of pre-election concern was slightly higher. For example, 60 of 1 525 respondents mentioned it as a safety risk when considering their journey to the polling station and 120 when considering queuing at the polling station. During the post-election survey, only 26 of 1 533 Ghanaian respondents stated that they had not voted due to COVID-19. However, 457 reported that they had been unwilling to attend political rallies or meetings due to the pandemic. This suggests that the impact of COVID-19 on participation during the campaign period may have been more significant than its impact on voter turnout. The Tanzanian and Ghanaian data are presented as percentages in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Frequency of responses relating to political participation by country

Response	Tanzania (n=1,506)	Ghana (n=1,533)
Mentioned COVID-19 as a reason for not voting	0%	1.70%
Did not mention COVID-19 as a reason for not voting	100%	98.30%
Mentioned COVID-19 as a reason for not attending rallies and political meetings	0.33%	29.81%
Did not mention COVID-19 as a reason for not attending rallies and political meetings	99.67%	70.19%

In the case of CAR, costs associated with the challenging conditions meant that we were unable to field our own survey. However, we were able to insert a more limited number of questions into a pre-election survey conducted by HHI and Echelle. In this survey, the questions were worded slightly differently, with respondents asked specifically about the impact of COVID-19 on certain aspects of political participation (whereas, in Tanzania and Ghana, respondents had to mention COVID-19 without prompting). The Central African responses regarding capacity to vote and participation in discussions and debate (see Table 2) suggest

that COVID-19 significantly impacted political participation. However, the difference in the emphasis of the questions makes direct comparison with Tanzania and Ghana difficult. Again, the responses suggest that participation during the campaign period was more badly affected than voter turnout.

Table 2. Impact of COVID-19 on political participation in CAR

	To what extent does COVID-19 impact your capacity to go and vote? (n= 2,379)	To what extent does COVID-19 impact your opportunity to participate in discussions and debate about the elections. (n= 2,379)
Extremely	163	151
A lot	596	636
A medium amount	152	209
A little	330	899
Not at all	1 138	483

The turnout figures for each of the national elections studied show significant changes from the immediately preceding iterations. However, this cannot be attributed simply to COVID-19. In Tanzania, turnout was low compared to historical levels (49.27 percent), but this can be explained with reference to the general political situation, which had been deteriorating for some time before the pandemic (Tanzania Elections Watch 2020; Taylor 2020). In Ghana, final results showed that there had actually been a 10% increase in turnout across the country when compared with the 2016 polls, suggesting that significant numbers of voters had not been deterred from casting their ballots due to COVID-19 (Nugent et al. 2021, p. 11). In CAR, turnout in the elections was very low, but, with conflict affecting large parts of the country, it is hard to isolate the specific impact of COVID-19.

The Instrumental Use of COVID-19 Measures

Contrary to the expectations expressed in much of the literature, we found little evidence of pandemic protocols being used instrumentally for political gain in these case study countries. In Tanzania, opposition activities were significantly constrained throughout the Magufuli presidency (Collord 2021). However, this was not justified with reference to the pandemic nor facilitated using COVID-19 specific legislation. In CAR, the ongoing armed conflict distracted from the

pandemic, and it, rather than COVID-19 mitigation measures, became the major driver of political exclusion during the elections. In both Ghana and Kenya, measures were in place that could potentially have been enforced unevenly for political gain but, unlike in, for example, Uganda or Zambia, there is little evidence that this occurred systematically.

MEASURES TO PREPARE FOR FUTURE PANDEMICS

Holding elections during a pandemic or a smaller-scale health emergency that affects either a whole country or certain areas within a country, adds an additional layer of complexity to what is an intricate task under ordinary circumstances. Therefore, it should be regarded as best practice if some measures are taken to ensure that countries are prepared before such a crisis emerges. Contingency planning is particularly important as, once a crisis begins, other elements of the response may distract from making provisions for elections. Furthermore, any measures that need to be rushed through at the last minute are less likely to receive appropriate oversight and may be more vulnerable to political instrumentalisation.

Electoral Laws Should be Updated to Cover Pandemics and Other Emergencies

During any emergency, a judgement on whether upcoming elections need to be postponed or cancelled must be made. As discussed above, there are certainly justifications for delaying elections, but these decisions can also be made on the basis of partisan considerations. Where elections do go ahead, safety protocols need to be put into place, and this involves further decisions about who is responsible for drafting and enforcing them. Although this did not occur in our case study elections, there is also a clear risk that these decisions can become instrumentalised for political gain. Current legislation regarding elections may not be flexible enough to allow officials to make the appropriate decisions about how to proceed in a future pandemic. In some countries, constitutions do not allow for delays to the end of government mandates, or for the creation of an interim government during an extension period. Furthermore, many constitutions forbid the passage of constitutional amendments during emergencies (International IDEA 2020, pp. 3-4). Although Ghana's election went ahead as planned, debates about a potential postponement showed the controversy that can be generated by such legal uncertainty.

Depending on the country, the rules governing elections are further established in a range of other documents, which can include specific electoral laws, codes of conduct, and EMB operating guidelines. These rules often contain

few or no provisions relating to health emergencies, the circumstances in which elections can be postponed, or exactly which bodies and individuals should create and enforce safety protocols. If these elements are not in place before a crisis is underway, there may be undesirable delays in decision-making where new legislation needs to be passed or amendments to electoral arrangements are made without legal basis. Additionally, the process may be rushed and not subjected to adequate scrutiny, leaving clear potential for manipulation and undesired consequences.

It is therefore important that countries update their relevant electoral laws to ensure that sensible and transparent processes for responding to future crises are established in advance and properly cross-referenced in all relevant documents. This process should involve consultation with actors from across the country's political spectrum, and new rules should be worded in a way that reduces opportunities for political instrumentalisation. The updated legislation may also include a means of external validation for electoral decision-making, through which the advice of carefully selected international or regional organisations may be required before decisions about postponements and cancellations are made.

Funding for Elections During Health Crises Should be Considered in Advance

The measures designed to reduce the risks of viral transmission during elections come at a financial cost. As our research shows, high-income countries are far better equipped to absorb these costs than LMICs, even once it is appreciated that the measures applied in high-income countries are likely to be more expensive. Some simple measures to prevent transmission, such as introducing handwashing buckets and sanitising electoral materials, are relatively inexpensive. However, once these measures are rolled out nationwide, which can often involve supplying tens of thousands of polling stations, the costs are substantial. Many LMIC governments cannot meet these requirements, so additional budgetary support will be required if elections are to be administered effectively.

Therefore, it is desirable to have a mechanism, potentially provided by the donor community, that provides emergency budgetary support for EMBs in LMICs.³ Such a funding arrangement would be difficult to put in place at short notice, so it would be better to establish it before a new emergency. As the budgets of EMBs tend to be fungible, this money could be specifically ringfenced, and only released if an election takes place during unusually challenging circumstances.

³ The authors thank Tanja Hollstein (Westminster Foundation for Democracy) for bringing this idea to our attention.

One major advantage of such an arrangement is that it could be used in other emergency conditions, such as when elections are scheduled to take place in countries recently affected by natural disasters.

Measures Should be Taken to Reduce the Number of Voters Who Travel Long Distances

During some elections, including in our case study countries, many voters will either choose to vote in an area where they do not live or find themselves registered in a different place. This issue particularly affects citizens who have migrated within their own countries – something that is often, but not exclusively, related to patterns of urbanisation. In high-income countries, arrangements such as postal voting can be effective in addressing this issue. However, many LMICs lack the resources and infrastructure to implement similar solutions. As a result, in some countries, many citizens will travel to another area to vote. This creates clear risks in the event of a health crisis, as mobile voters may increase the geographical spread of viral infections by carrying them to or from their place of residence. The journeys that mobile voters are required to make, which often take place on public transport, may also lead to greater risks of transmission for them and other passengers. Therefore, reducing the number of voters who travel during elections can lessen some of the risks associated with holding an election during a future pandemic. This can be addressed now through initiatives that facilitate the reregistration of voters who have moved.

Arrangements Should be Made to Ensure Election Observation in the Future

COVID-19 disrupted the work of election observers in several ways (Vasciannie 2023), and similar issues are likely to emerge during a future pandemic. International observation groups will encounter difficulties relating to travel restrictions and quarantine periods, and many seasoned observers may not want to offer their expertise due to the risks to their health. Specific observation missions may also suffer from reduced or delayed funding when the bodies that normally support international observation are faced with other priorities. They will also need to follow the specific protocols relating to the pandemic that have been put in place in the country hosting the election. In these situations, it may be prudent to increase the ties between international and domestic observation missions, or to further develop emerging virtual monitoring technology (Birch et al. 2020, pp. 23-25). However, neither of these measures is straightforward.

Creating observation partnerships would be beneficial during future

pandemics as this would reduce the number of people travelling internationally. This has several other possible benefits such as helping to build the capacity of domestic observation groups, potentially allowing them more access and media coverage, and giving a greater sense of ownership over the observation process to the citizens of the country hosting the elections. However, in many countries, domestic observers have limited levels of independence, and their methods and findings are susceptible to manipulation, generally by incumbents (Makulilo 2011). This route is, therefore, only desirable in those countries that have domestic observation initiatives with a high level of independence from political interference. Putting meaningful partnerships in place, and ensuring that adequate capacity building has occurred, would be difficult to do at short notice, particularly during a health crisis. Therefore, these links, which are desirable even under normal circumstances, should be developed now.

Virtual election observation, which often takes the form of online citizen reporting mechanisms, has the clear advantage of providing a wide geographical spread and making every citizen with access to the relevant technology a potential observer. Such initiatives can even collect data on election quality when professional observers are unable to deploy. However, the ways in which they collect information during an election may be less systematic than traditional observation missions, and can be susceptible to manipulation by those seeking to disrupt the process. Furthermore, many citizens will be excluded from participation due to issues regarding access to technology and digital literacy, particularly in LMICs. Virtual observation initiatives also require considerable planning and would be difficult to establish at short notice during a crisis. Therefore, in contexts where they are considered desirable, putting arrangements in place for either of these solutions is something that policymakers should be considering now.

MEASURES THAT CAN BE INTRODUCED IN THE EVENT OF A NEW PANDEMIC

As there is great uncertainty regarding the nature of any future pandemic or other emergency, much of the preparation for holding elections cannot be undertaken in advance. This section, therefore, contains suggestions on how to proceed in the event of a new health crisis.

Advice on Dealing with Specific Pandemics Should be Tailored to Context

When a new pandemic emerges, a range of academics and international elections

experts are likely to offer advice on how to mitigate the risk of holding elections. When doing so, our research suggests that there should be an awareness that in LMIC contexts there are financial and structural limitations on the measures that can be implemented. Any new recommendations must be clear about the contexts in which they are designed to be applied and should ideally offer a range of realistic solutions so as to be relevant in different contexts.

Safety Measures Should be Established Early in the Electoral Process

It takes time to put risk mitigation measures in place for an election, especially as these measures may require a range of supplies to be ordered and distributed. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that adequate mitigation measures are in place as early as possible in every electoral cycle, rather than imposed as an afterthought in the event of an emergency. This is particularly important because activities such as voter registration, which carries similar risks to voting, often occur months before election day. These protocols should be reviewed periodically to keep up-to-date with the latest knowledge about the pandemic. When designing and updating these protocols, it is important that election planners draw upon the best available advice from international agencies dealing with public health. This will not only ensure that appropriate practices are developed; but if this process is explicit and publicised, it can increase public confidence in the measures by highlighting that they are technical rather than political.

EMBs Should Designate a Specific Point Person

Ensuring that elections take place safely during a pandemic or other emergency adds an additional burden to election officials who are often already extremely busy in the months preceding elections. In these conditions, it is easy for considerations relating to the emergency to become secondary as officials focus on their day-to-day roles in delivering elections. As a result, specific measures need to be taken to ensure that the new pandemic or other crisis receives adequate and timely consideration throughout the electoral cycle. One way of doing this is to select a point person – ideally a dedicated commissioner – who is responsible for ensuring that health-related issues are accounted for during each stage of the election. This person, who could have a public health background, should not be distracted by other tasks beyond health-related issues. Their authority to ensure that adequate health measures are taken at every point in the electoral cycle should be agreed upon by all parties concerned.

Election Officials' Health Risks Should be Minimised

Election officials themselves are likely to fall into a category of high risk during

any new pandemic or health crisis. Their ordinary work requirements involve meeting a wide range of people, many of whom are also in high-risk professions. To ensure that the work of EMBs is not disrupted, it is crucial to ensure that personnel follow the most recent guidance in their regular working environments.

A Balance Should be Found Between Safety and Political Party Campaigns

In a new crisis, political parties may be reluctant to accept preventative measures that affect their ability to reach voters directly. In these situations, measures taken to reduce the risk of transmission during campaigning, which affect, for example, the large rallies and door-to-door canvassing that are commonplace in many LMICs, are likely to be among those that encounter the most resistance from political parties. Indeed, we found that they are frequently ignored. Some parties will see an advantage in continuing these activities if their rivals discontinue, while other parties will fear a significant disadvantage if they stop but their competitors do not.

Restrictions on campaigning are likely to be an even larger problem in LMICs where opposition parties tend to have limited resources and often rely on vigorous campaigning in the lead-up to elections in order to remain competitive. This is particularly problematic in contexts where they are denied equal access to media outlets such as radio, television and newspapers. In these cases, alternatives such as guaranteed free time on traditional media or increased public funding to cover associated costs, could also be considered to counterbalance the loss of face-to-face campaigning. In these situations, a balance must be struck between the need to protect competitive elections and the need to halt the spread of the pandemic. Where this balance is struck should ultimately depend on the severity of the pandemic and its means of transmission. Political parties should be fully consulted during the process of deciding these protocols, as this may encourage compromise and compliance. It may ultimately be decided that rather than attempting to totally ban elements of the campaign – which has the potential to create an uneven playing field, or to be met with low levels of compliance – in some situations the best solution could be to allow large interpersonal events such as rallies to continue while focusing on methods to make them safer. It is particularly important for politicians to buy into the process, as it is far harder to get citizens to comply with safety protocols when they see politicians ignore them.

Measures Should be Taken to Increase Public Compliance with Safety Protocols

Many of the simplest measures for preventing the spread of viruses require a

large amount of public compliance. We find that this cannot be taken for granted, as often citizens are either unaware of or ignore many COVID-19 protocols. Widespread compliance with election-related protocols can be boosted if the public understands the risks associated with the pandemic and why the protocols are important in reducing transmission. This requires continued and broader public education on the health crisis. Changes should also be made to voter education, so that the new protocols are fully incorporated in standard instructions on how to vote and any alterations to the procedure are explained. Another way that compliance can be improved is to have clearer guidelines on how the protocols can be enforced. Procedures for correcting non-compliance need to be established and they should contain proportionate penalties for serious or repeated breaches. It also needs to be clear who is responsible for undertaking this enforcement. Issues of compliance should not be an afterthought, particularly as new legislation may need to be introduced.

CONCLUSIONS

By reviewing academic and grey literature and presenting findings from the 'African Elections during the COVID-19 Pandemic' project, this article has highlighted several issues relating to COVID-19 and elections. It has argued that measures suggested for mitigating the risk of transmission during elections failed to account for the realities of organising elections in LMICs and that insufficient attention was paid to issues of compliance and enforcement. This meant that the protocols introduced during elections often failed to adequately ensure the safety of voters and administrators. The literature review also highlighted the ways in which delayed elections and more general COVID-19 restrictions can be used instrumentally by incumbents seeking political advantage. However, these dynamics were not particularly apparent in our case study elections, suggesting that, although serious, they are not universal. The recommendations presented in the final section of this paper built upon these lessons, to propose ways in which the impacts of any future pandemic or other health crisis can be mitigated. Some of these recommendations will also be useful in addressing other types of emergencies that can disrupt elections. Although most of these recommendations will only be useful once a new crisis is underway, some of them will require action in advance. With great uncertainty surrounding when and where the next emergency might emerge, the time for action is now.

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