



# Disaster management in a crisis state: Dealing with the corona crisis in Zimbabwe

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## KEY TAKE AWAYS

- Zimbabwe is in a deep political and economic crisis
- When the corona virus arrived, the government responded with harsh coercive measures.
- These measures had some effect in the short-term, but it has been impossible to maintain compliance
- Although the corona infection has not spread too widely yet, the government's ability to deal with it is severely limited by its lack of administrative capacity and legitimacy.

The corona pandemic represents a massive challenge for all states. In the first instance, it is a health crisis, with thousands of citizens infected and dying in most countries. At the same time, the health crisis is accompanied by economic crisis, as government measures to deal with the pandemic lead to severe contractions in economic activity. Finally, it represents a political crisis, as governments are faced with the massive challenge of addressing both the pandemic itself and its effects.

The ability of states to deal with the crisis varies greatly. While rich countries with strong institutions are well placed to handle it reasonably well, poorer countries with institutions that are less effective are severely constrained. And countries that were facing severe crisis even before the pandemic struck face the greatest challenge of all.

One such country is Zimbabwe, a country facing multiple crises simultaneously. In this brief, I discuss how the country has dealt with the corona pandemic. I start by briefly describing the general crisis in the country, the development of the pandemic and the government's response to it. Next, I discuss how the response to the crisis is shaped by the nature of the state and the political regime. Finally, I speculate about the likely political implications of the pandemic.

## Corona in Zimbabwe

The first corona virus cases were registered in Zimbabwe on 21 March 2020. Since then, the virus has spread, albeit not to the degree that was initially feared. Currently (25 September), the official number of positive cases stands at 7752, while 227 deaths have been recorded.<sup>1</sup> However, because of limited testing, these official figures are likely to be a significant underestimation of the real number of cases. According to the British Medical Journal, almost all tests are carried out in the two main cities, Harare and Bulawayo, which means that positive cases outside these cities are likely to remain undetected.<sup>2</sup>

While all countries were caught unprepared for the pandemic, Zimbabwe was especially ill-equipped to deal with it. Its health system, among the best in Africa until the 1990s, is woefully inadequate, after being neglected for a number of years, particularly after the onset of the economic crisis around 2000. Health facilities lack both beds, protective equipment, testing facilities and basic medical supplies. Moreover, doctors, nurses and other health workers are poorly paid and have been on strike to protest against pay levels and working conditions.

The government imposed a strict lockdown on 30 March. The lockdown was heavily enforced, and violators were treated harshly. Subsequently, restrictions were eased, but after an increase in positive cases, more severe restrictions were re-imposed in late July. Since then, the number of cases has continued to rise, from 3659 on 1 August to 7683 on 18 September.

In a situation where social security and safety nets are lacking and most people depend on the informal sector for a living, the lockdown has had severe consequences. To the extent that the lockdown has

1. <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/zimbabwe/>  
2. <https://www.bmj.com/content/370/bmj.m3267>

been effective, closure of public transport has made it impossible for commuters to travel, and street vendors and traders have been denied access to their workplaces.

However, it has proved impossible to ensure compliance with lockdown rules over time. When there is no social security and no local access to food and pure water, maintaining lockdown, hygiene and social distancing is impossible. According to the BBC, more than 100000 people have been arrested for what the government describes a violation of lockdown regulations.<sup>3</sup>

During the lockdown, there has also been a crack-down on the opposition and other critics of the government. Several critics of the government have also been arrested. Among those arrested are Hopewell Chin'ono, one of the country's best-known critical journalists, opposition politician Jacob Ngarivhume and award-winning author Tsitsi Dangarembga.

In a country with widespread corruption, there has also been allegations of corrupt deals associated with the pandemic. In June, the country's health minister Obadiah Moyo was arrested over allegations of corruption and misuse of office regarding the procurement of coronavirus tests and other medical equipment. He was subsequently dismissed. Moyo allegedly awarded the US\$60 million contract to Drax Consult, a subsidiary of Drax International, without going through the proper procurement process.

Like the rest of Africa (with the partial exception of South Africa), the corona pandemic has so far not been as devastating as in many other parts of the world. There may be a number of reasons for this, including the youth of the population, possible immunity because of earlier, similar virus infections and less travel than in many other regions. Nevertheless, the government's response to the pandemic has revealed the government's inability to deal with it. Below, I discuss the origins of this inability, focusing on state capacity and legitimacy and the character of the political regime. First, however, a brief outline of a framework of analysis.

### Capacity, legitimacy and crisis management

Francis Fukuyama has recently argued that the most crucial factor determining the ability to handle the pandemic is the character of a country's state apparatus and ruling regime:

*Countries with capable, legitimate governments will come through relatively well and may embrace reforms that make them even stronger and more resilient, thus facilitating their future outperformance. Countries with weak state capacity or poor leadership will be in trouble, set for stagnation, if not impoverishment and instability. The problem is that the second group greatly outnumber the first.<sup>4</sup>*

The two key factors emphasized by Fukuyama are *capacity* and *legitimacy*. Both terms are in need of further specification. *State capacity* can refer to the ability to maintain control over its territory, or more broadly, its "ability to make and enforce rules, and to deliver services, regardless whether that government is democratic or not".<sup>5</sup> This ability, in turn, depends on factors such as the effectiveness of government institutions, the degree of bureaucratic professionalization and the ability to extract resources through taxation. For some types of capacity, such as upholding the state's monopoly of violence and the rule of law, coercive capacity is central. For other aspects, such as provision of services or tax collection, administrative capacity is more central.

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3. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53462259>

4. Francis Fukuyama (2020) "The Pandemic and Political Order: It takes a State, Foreign Affairs, July/August, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2020-06-09/pandemic-and-political-order>

5. Francis Fukuyama (2013), "What is Governance?", *Governance* 26(3), p.350.

Legitimacy concerns whether, how and why people accept (or not) the authority and decisions of a particular actor or institution. In systems with a low level of legitimacy, where the gap between the regime's claim to authority and popular consent is wide, domination can be maintained through the application of non-legitimate forms of power. If successful, the regime may succeed in maintaining compliance without closing the legitimacy gap. This is especially relevant when states and citizens alike are facing a fundamental threat, such as potential pandemic, in which calculations of compliance, coercion, and resistance change.

Capacity and legitimacy are interdependent. First, a legitimate state is likely to meet less - overt as well as passive - resistance. Second, citizens in a legitimate state contribute willingly and actively to the implementation of public policies and this makes the state more cost-effective and stronger. In this sense, legitimate states are better able to implement policies – have better capacity - than less legitimate states. Conversely, states with political and administrative capacity to serve the major part of population with essential services are likely to be more legitimate.

Faced with the corona pandemic, states with a high level of coercive capacity (What Michael Mann calls “despotic power”<sup>6</sup>) will be able to impose strict lockdowns, with harsh treatment of those who are found to disobey. This is likely to be quite effective, at least for a while. However, to deal successfully with a crisis of this kind, it is necessary to maintain compliance with regulations regarding social distancing and hygiene over time. This cannot be done through coercion alone. There are two further requirements: First, the state must have an administrative apparatus that is capable of implementing and monitoring that regulations are followed (what Mann calls “infrastructural power”.<sup>7</sup> Second, the restrictions need to be considered legitimate by citizens. The latter, in turn, is shaped by the legitimacy of the political regime itself.

### **Before corona: The evolution of a crisis**

Since the late 1990s, Zimbabwe has been in a state of permanent crisis. At that time, the ruling ZANU-PF party, which has ruled the country since the end of white minority rule in 1980, faced a serious opposition to its rule for the first time. The Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), led by the former trade union leader Morgan Tsvangirai, became a significant political force, and was seen by ZANU-PF as a serious threat to its power. In particular, it built up large support in urban areas, leaving ZANU-PF to rely on support in rural areas and in the party apparatus and among those with close ties to it.<sup>8</sup>

However, by the late 1990s, rural support of the regime had also weakened. The peasantry had been hit hard by the decline in government subsidies and services during the 1990s, and there was an increasing tendency of evasion, into a subsistence economy or into different parts of the informal sector. On the one hand, cuts in expenditure weakened the state's administrative capacity. The impressive expansion of government services (especially in rural areas) proved impossible to sustain under ESAP, as expenditures were cut and growth rates declined. The erosion of state services in turn undermined the policy of building state legitimacy through service provision. On the other hand, the decline in services, together with the continued power and legitimacy of traditional leaders, led to a weakening of the state's position vis-à-vis traditional leaders. Taken together, this meant that the position of the ruling regime became increasingly fragile. Its political basis in urban areas, the enthusiasm of the early independence period and the regime's core rural support had all been weakened.

To recreate its rural support base, the government made the crucial decision to carry out large scale land reform, by taking over the majority of the white owned commercial farms. Redistribution of land

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6. Michael Mann (1986), *The Sources of Social Power*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

7. *Ibid.*

8. Bond Patrick and Masimba Manyanya (2002). *Zimbabwe's Plunge: Exhausted Nationalism, Neoliberalism, and the Search for Social Justice*, Durban: University of Natal Press. Hevina Dashwood, (2000). *Zimbabwe, The Political Economy of Transformation*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press; Stein Sundstøl Eriksen, (2012) “Regimes, Constituencies and the Politics of State Formation: Zimbabwe and Botswana Compared”, *International Political Science Review*, vol 33(3) 261-278.

had been a key demand in the independence struggle, and while progress in this area had been limited in the 1990s, the demand for land was never in doubt. Land reform therefore appeared as the best strategy of political survival for the ruling regime. Faced by a situation where its own position was under threat, the regime chose to pursue policies which could strengthen its own legitimacy, even when these policies also undermined economic growth and the economic basis of the state itself.

The regime's radicalised land policy must be seen as an attempt to shore up rural support in a situation where the regime's legitimacy had eroded. Trapped in a situation where the imperatives of control and legitimation stood in direct contradiction to each other, the politics of survival compelled the regime to choose policies that could – at least in the short to medium term - bolster its legitimacy. To some extent, and in spite of the chaotic ways it was implemented, regime support in rural areas probably increased as a result of land reforms. At the same time, such reforms carried their own risks: The confiscation of land led to a dramatic fall in agricultural production and the export earnings on which the state depended.

The result of these developments was that the regime was able to maintain its power by securing the support of the party elite, the military and the upper-level state administration, and on a regeneration of its support base among residents in rural areas through land reform. By maintaining support among these key groups, the regime has managed to remain in power in the 20-year period since the crisis began. Since then, the country has been in a continuous economic crisis, with periods of hyperinflation. Politically, there have been several contested elections, a period with coalition government and sporadic violent protests.

### **Capacity, legitimacy and the corona crisis**

Twenty years after the onset of the crisis, the Zimbabwean state remains weak in terms of administrative capacity. Even after the weakening and fragmentation of the organised political opposition in recent years, the ruling regime has not been able to rebuild state institutions. The inability to address the corona crisis is an effective way reflects this fundamental weakness.

However, the state still has substantial coercive capacity, which has been revealed in its response to the corona crisis. The crack-down on protests and opposition and the mass arrests of people violating lockdown regulations show that the state is able and willing to employ coercion when considered necessary.

The regime also remains dependent on support among the rural population and the state apparatus. On the one hand, land reform has been widely popular in rural areas. On the other hand, those with positions in the regime or close ties to it have been given access to resources and benefits.

In urban areas, support remains limited. At the same time, urban residents have been hardest hit by the corona crisis and the policies seeking to address it. The lockdown and other measures have undermined their livelihood and the supply of basic necessities. Although rural residents have also been affected, they have been better able to cope with the crisis, not least because their access to land makes them able to maintain food supply and to survive through informal sale of agricultural surplus – an option not available in urban areas.<sup>9</sup> Urban residents are therefore the most vulnerable in the current situation. As a consequence of the pandemic there has also been significant reverse migration, from urban to rural areas.

Given the dependence of the regime on rural voters and the improbability of regaining urban support, it is likely that the regime will prioritize rural areas in its handling of the pandemic. For urban residents, this means that their needs are unlikely to be prioritized. It also means that any protests emerging in urban areas are likely to be put down harshly.

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9. <https://zimbabweland.wordpress.com>

However, in urban areas, it is likely that lockdown regulations will not be followed. There are several reasons for this. First, since the majority of urban residents work in the informal sector as street vendors, petty traders, casual workers etc., and since the government provides very limited support to compensate for lost earnings, they literally have no choice but to break regulations in order to survive. Second, although the state has substantial coercive capacity, it is impossible to monitor compliance with regulations such as social distancing by means of coercion alone. Third, the regime's lack of legitimacy and trust in the government in urban areas makes it likely that people's willingness to comply voluntarily to the extent possible will be limited.

### **Concluding remarks**

Although testing is quite limited, it appears that so far, the corona virus has not spread too widely in Zimbabwe. This could be because of the young population, existing immunity, limited travel or some other reason. Until now, the efforts to combat the virus have had more severe effects than the virus itself. However, if a major outbreak were to occur, the country is ill-prepared for dealing with it. In the event of such an outbreak, the impact could be disastrous. Dealing with a crisis of this kind requires more than coercive power. It also requires administrative capacity and legitimacy, something that is lacking in Zimbabwe today. In a situation with eroding state capacity, low levels of legitimacy and intense political polarization, the ability to deal with a major outbreak is limited.

The pandemic and the measures taken to deal with it are likely to reinforce the country's political and economic crisis. On the one hand, the economy, which was in a severe crisis before the pandemic, is severely affected by the measures taken to address the pandemic. On the other hand, worsening living conditions and harsh repression is likely to further undermine trust and legitimacy, especially in urban areas.

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