



Authoritarianism and Covid-19: The Complex Realities of Public Action in Africa

Fred Eboko

French Research Institute for
Sustainable Development (IRD)

Fred Eboko, Senior Research Director at the French Research Institute for Sustainable Development (IRD) and Centre Population and Development (IRD - University of Paris). He is also IRD Representative in Cote d'Ivoire.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many highlighted the **link between authoritarian regimes and effectiveness in managing the pandemic**. However, when it comes to Africa, the link between the quality of the response and regime type is not a direct correlation. In fact, the efficiency of a country's pandemic management primarily **depended on national trajectories** in most cases. This was the case for **Aids in Africa**, as it is with Covid today^[1].

BETWEEN DEMOCRATIC CALLS TO ORDER AND AUTHORITARIAN SHOOTINGS, FROM SENEGAL TO RWANDA

The examples of Senegal and Rwanda clearly illustrate how similar measures can lead to **different outcomes depending on regime type**. To illustrate, on March 21st and 23rd, 2020, Rwanda's authoritarian government and Senegal's democratic government **imposed a curfew**. In these two very different countries a curfew had not been implemented in decades and, as such, a few groups of young **people**

decided to defy the ban. In Dakar, there was friction between the youth and the gendarmes, and a few blows of truncheon marked the evening. Similarly, in Rwanda's capital Kigali, some young people also clashed with the police. The outcome, however, was quite different from what happened in Dakar: the police shot two youths in the street. On August 7th, 2020, a similar scene occurred. Police [beat a 30-year-old man to death](#) for braving curfew rules. This stark comparison shows a **return to the use of "legitimate violence"**, whose disproportionality underlines the difference between a pluralistic regime where political authorities debate and negotiate – like Senegal – and an authoritarian country like Rwanda.

The divergences between Senegal and Rwanda are also visible in their leadership. Macky Sall, the Senegalese President, came to power in 2012 following an election, as has been the case in the country since the 1970s. Meanwhile, Rwandan President Paul Kagame came to power after the 1994 Tutsi genocide: he reigns as an absolute master and has **curtailed freedoms in the name of stability, peace, and economic development.** Economic recovery and spectacular infrastructure construction over the past twenty years are the main arguments behind his **disciplinary rationale.** During the COVID-19 pandemic, the population silently followed Kagame as a guide in a country that is simultaneously cited as an example by some and denounced by others – such as Human Right Watch – for its authoritarianism.

If Rwanda seemed to do well in containing COVID-19 given its strict control over the population and on travel restrictions, the same cannot be said as regards its **vaccine rollout.** Although vaccine doses were ordered and received through the international Covax (COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access) initiative (240,000 doses from AstraZeneca) and direct partnerships (102,000 doses from Pfizer-BioNTech), the **goal to vaccinate one third of the population by the end of the year** will be a hard feat. To date (June 23rd, 2021), Rwanda ranks 17th among African countries, with only 2.71% of its population vaccinated, just behind Mauritania (14th), Cote d'Ivoire (15th), Ghana (16th), and far behind Morocco (1st) – which has [vaccinated 26% of its population](#) so far.

ANOMIC AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

As an **alternative to exerting control by force,** other authoritarian systems are [driven by a central idea](#): the confiscation of power by the elite, which weakens the social bond and causes social relations to become, according to Durkheim's definition, "anomic", meaning deprived of values and unpredictable. As a result, in some of these countries, **authoritarian leaders' religious and mystical stances** can become the guiding principles for public policies. For example, former Burundian President Pierre Nkurunziza – an authoritarian leader who was ruthless to his opponents and a follower of the Evangelical church – had decreed that prayer would protect from Covid-19. As a result, Burundi did not take specific measures to counter the advancement of the pandemic.

Nkurunziza *officially* died of a heart attack on June 8th, 2020, just like the former Tanzanian president, John Magufuli, a devout Catholic, who passed away in March 2021; he had **poorly managed the first wave of the pandemic** and promptly declared the “end of Covid” just a few months after the first outbreaks in the country.

The underlying **lack of values behind authoritarianism** has seriously affected the pandemic management, with scandals of embezzlement of funds that were supposed to combat the spread of the virus. Cameroon best epitomizes such phenomenon in Central Africa, with the revelation of the embezzlement of the «**Special National Solidarity Fund**” created in 2020 as well as the grant given by the IMF. Similar [scandals](#) have also transpired in South Africa.

African countries' management of the COVID-19 pandemic speaks volumes about how outdated and inaccurate binary explanations (such as developmentalist theories inspired by Rostow) can be, including the **connection between development and democracy and authoritarianism and efficiency** in dealing with Covid-19. At the same time, however, exploring the link between authoritarianism and the pandemic can highlight the complexity of public action trajectories in specific contexts, which are informed first and foremost by their history^[2].

NOTES

[1] Eboko F., *Public Policy Lessons from the AIDS Response in Africa*, Routledge, London & New York, 2021.

[2] Bayart J.F., *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*, London: Longman, 1993.

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AUTHORITARIANISM AND COVID-19: ECONOMIES, SOCIETIES, INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION

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The COVID-19 pandemic has posed an enormous challenge to the ability of political systems to **cope with the human and economic disruption caused by the virus**. Furthermore, it has generated competitive dynamics in the international arena, notably between democracies and autocracies. Since the pandemic's early days, the latter appeared to be better placed to provide a **more efficient response than democratic systems**, thanks to their fast decision-making and capability to impose restrictions on citizens' freedoms, including quarantine measures necessary to contain the spread of COVID-19.

But is that really the case? How did **authoritarian regimes respond to the pandemic** in different regions of the world? What impact did their response have on citizens' lives and in the international arena? And how did COVID-19 shape authoritarian politics?

** Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti is a Research Fellow at the Russia, Caucasus and Central Asia Centre at ISPI.*

** Giovanna De Maio is a Visiting Fellow at the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (IERES) at the George Washington University, and a Non-Resident Fellow at The Brookings Institution.*

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