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## The politics of COVID-19 in the Sahel



People take precautions in Mali against COVID-19. Source: [World Bank / Ousmane Traore \(MAKAVELI\)](#)

Covid-19 is not the only crisis, and probably not the biggest crisis in the Sahel. But it will likely make a bad situation worse. As the virus spreads, it will do so in a fragile and conflict-afflicted region, inserting itself into already complex and fluid dynamics. As previous pandemics have shown worldwide, policies often prove to be far more influenced by politics, ideology and ignorance rather than evidence and best practices.<sup>1</sup> “Know your pandemic, act on its politics” was an injunction for HIV/AIDS programming efforts in the 2000s. But it can be equally applied to the current context.<sup>2</sup> This Alert takes a look at the politics of COVID-19 in the Sahel and the impact of the virus, and governmental responses to it, on

civil liberties, the control over state territory and democratic processes. While this is a time of disruption, policy-makers should not let this crisis go to waste and consider Covid-19 as an invitation to increase consultation with affected communities and engage in locally acceptable solutions – with an aim to find a way forward for more inclusive governance in the Sahel.<sup>3</sup>

### Contested COVID-19 responses

In recent months, Sahelian governments have been modelling their response to fight the virus on the likes of East Asian, European and North American strategies. As the table

	Lockdown	Movement restrictions	Social distancing	Governance & Economy	Public Health
	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Mali</b> 712 cases 39 deaths		International flight suspension, Border closure, Curfews (lifted)	Limit public gatherings, Public service closure, School closure	Economic measures (financial support package of 9M EUR to the economy), Emergency administrative structures activated or established	Health screening in airports and border crossings, introduction of isolation and quarantine policies, general hygiene and social distancing recommendations, Mandatory mask wearing
	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Niger</b> 832 cases 46 deaths	Partial lockdown	International flight suspension, Border closure, Curfews	Limit public gatherings, School closure, Changes in prison-related policies	Economic measures (cash transfer, payment of electricity and water bills for the poorest, VTA suspended for all COVID-19 related importation), State of emergency declared	Health screening in airports and border crossings, General recommendations, introduction of isolation and quarantine policies, Strengthening the public health system, Mandatory mask wearing
	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Burkina Faso</b> 760 cases 50 deaths	Partial lockdown	International flight suspension, Border closure, Domestic travel restrictions, Curfews	Limit public gatherings, Public service closure, School closure	Economic measures (special fund of 271M EUR allocated to COVID-19 related measures), State of emergency declared	Health screening in airports and border crossings, Amendments to funeral and burial regulations, Introduction of isolation and quarantine policies, Awareness campaigns, Mandatory mask wearing
	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Chad</b> 322 cases 31 deaths	Targeted lockdown (movement restriction outside refugee and IDP camps) + Lock-down of the capital	International flights suspension, Domestic travel restrictions, Curfews, Check-point within the country	Limit public gatherings, Changes in prison-related policies	Economic measures (190M EUR food security and social safety nets, payment of electricity and water bills for the poorest, tax cuts, accelerated payments from the state to suppliers), State of emergency declared	Health screening in airports and border crossing, Introduction of isolation and quarantine policies, Mandatory mask wearing

### Overview of Covid-19 measures in the Sahel<sup>3</sup>

above makes clear, despite a low caseload of confirmed cases, countries in the region are going into partial lockdown and enforcing strict social distancing measures. These preventive measures can be explained in part by the lack of ICU (Intensive Care Units) beds and ventilators available in the case of a bigger outbreak: at the time of writing, there are 15 ICU beds in Burkina Faso and 40 in Mali, while there are 5 ventilators in Niger, 11 in Mali and 56 in Mali.<sup>4</sup> In Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, a mix of social distancing, economic and public health measures, along with movement restriction and closure of certain economic sectors have been enacted early on.<sup>5</sup> Some of these measures proved controversial.

In an effort to combat the spread of the virus, for example, Sahelian countries have closed markets, despite a large part of the urban population being dependent on work in the informal sector, such as street trading

and open markets. For populations living at or near subsistence level with no access to welfare schemes, strong restrictions such as these combined with few services have increased popular dissatisfaction. Despite some economic measures which include cash transfers, paying bills and food safety nets for the poorest, Sahelian states do not have the financial means to offer generous welfare packages or take measures to compensate for lost incomes. The UNDP predicts that nearly half of all jobs in Africa could be lost due to Covid-19, underlining how the health crisis is likely to deepen socio-economic inequalities.<sup>6</sup> Outcries against lock-down measures can already be heard across the Sahel, with people identifying food insecurity and the economic hardship as bigger threats than the virus itself. Two weeks after the beginning of its outbreak, on 25 March Burkina Faso closed all markets. On 20 April it reopened the large market in Ouagadougou (one market out of

forty in the city), and one in Bobo-Dioulasso, the country's second largest city. A week later this led to clashes in Ouagadougou between police and traders demanding the reopening of all markets across the country.<sup>7</sup>

In a similar effort to fight the virus, at the end of March Niger imposed a ban on collective prayers. Yet as a testimony to the state's limited reach in peripheral regions, most mosques remained open outside of urban centres.<sup>8</sup> In Niamey, police arrested imams and hundreds of worshipers attending the Friday prayer. It degenerated into violent clashes on 17 April between worshipers and state security forces. With the beginning of Ramadan and the risk of further clashes, the government eased the curfew and allowed the breaking of the fast outside of curfew hours.<sup>9</sup> Although still in place in principle, the ban on collective prayer has not been enforced since the beginning of Ramadan on 23 April. In Mali, despite calls to close mosques, the government has been careful not to legislate in that area.<sup>10</sup>

### Undermining civil liberties and the state

Against this backdrop of economic hardship and resentment against certain government measures, the Covid-19 outbreak risks further emphasising central Sahelian states' inability to provide basic governance, of which health delivery is an important component. In urban centres, the implementation of states of emergency, curfews and movement restrictions risks acting not only as a necessary protection measure, but similarly as a gateway for increasing restrictions on civil liberties. States of emergency grant governments special powers to bypass parliament which risks eroding democratic norms. In Mali, a special law grants the government the right to bypass the newly elected parliament and rule by decree on matters of public affairs and international treaties.<sup>11</sup> By virtue of making social gatherings illegal, protests have been virtually banned, including in Burkina Faso where reports of police brutality to enforce the curfew are many.<sup>12</sup>

In Niger, the violent repression of protesting residents has not received the necessary attention as the Covid-19 outbreak dominates the headlines.<sup>13</sup> Niamey, Ouagadougou and Bamako have also made mask wearing mandatory. This injunction – which is impractical in view of limited stocks and high prices – can be interpreted not as wishful thinking but as a way to limit protests by potentially framing any type of gathering as a health hazard.

Turning to peripheral areas of the Sahel where states have limited reach, the lack of a strong government response is likely to increase the space for alternative governance providers such as customary authorities and non-state armed actors.<sup>14</sup> Should Covid-19 cases increase in those more remote areas of the Sahel, alternative governance providers (e.g. armed groups, traditional leaders) might be able to enforce certain measures, for instance the implementation of curfews, roadblocks and some contact tracing. But they are unlikely to fill the gap in health services left by absent state authorities. In the meantime, casualties from ongoing conflicts continue to outnumber COVID-19 deaths across the Sahel, with massacres against civilians by national military forces in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso further fuelling grievances against the state amid the outbreak.<sup>15</sup> A recent example is the discovery in Niger of a mass grave of likely more than 100 hundred Tuareg and Fulani civilians, who disappeared following their arrest by state security forces in early April.<sup>16</sup> These dynamics risk accelerating the central state authority's failure to account for increasing economic hardship and humanitarian need. This will feed into the logic of marginalisation and grievances of citizens across the Sahel, which radical actors have been increasingly successful at exploiting. Actors such as ISGS (the Islamic State in the Sahel) have indicated their willingness to capitalise on the outbreak of Covid-19 amid continued attacks<sup>17</sup>. But so far, this seems to be mainly rhetoric.<sup>18</sup> While the EU Training Mission (EUTM) has halted activities amid the outbreak, contingent rotations of MINUSMA, the French Counter-terror operation Barkhane as well as the Malian Armed Forces so far continue largely unaffected.

## What consequences for elections?

A further concern is that organising elections under conditions of increasingly restricted civil liberties could further undermine the legitimacy of democratic processes. All three central Sahelian states – Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso – have scheduled elections for 2020. Legislative elections held in Mali amid the outbreak of Covid-19 in March and April 2020 saw voter turnout drop to an all-time low of 12.5% in Bamako. It risks turning the electoral process into an empty shell.<sup>19</sup> The stakes in the electoral process are high in Niger, where the first round of presidential elections scheduled for December 2020 are expected to lead to a power transition given the expiration of the term limit of president Mahamadou Issoufou.<sup>20</sup> Another big test for electoral legitimacy are Burkina Faso's presidential and parliamentary elections, which are scheduled for November 2020. Even prior to the pandemic, the state illustrated its limited governing capacity when it decided to arm non-state groups in the country's Northern regions to fight jihadists. It will now also rely on these vigilante groups to help conduct the elections.<sup>21</sup> Weak state capacity to deliver public goods and fragile social cohesion could be further exacerbated through Covid-19, giving more leeway to political opportunists.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the timelines for the preparatory phases of the electoral process risk being too ambitious in a context where voter registration has been temporarily suspended because of Covid-19, as is the case in Burkina Faso, or severely delayed, as in Niger. It risks constitutional dilemmas further down the line.<sup>23</sup> For example, Burkina Faso postponed its 24 March constitutional referendum over security concerns.<sup>24</sup> The referendum would have allowed the diaspora to vote and ushered in a fifth Burkinabe republic. Instead, the referendum will be held in November in parallel to the elections, in which the diaspora is not formally eligible to vote creating a degree of confusion. As such, Covid-19 will further weaken the state's ability to hold credible elections as scheduled.<sup>25</sup>

## A way forward for governance

The Sahel's response to Covid-19 is harmed by the region's poor health care systems and a failing communication strategy by the government. There is low awareness of the disease among the general population, and if people are ill, there are limited facilities to treat them. Many people still do not believe the virus is real and conspiracy theories are currently circulating on social media about governments faking the pandemic. Similar claims were also widespread during the Ebola epidemic, which made the government's health response more difficult. The pandemic also highlights however, the existing governance challenges in the Sahel. The fault-lines becoming apparent amid the Covid-19 outbreak will lead to more socio-economic frustration, already widespread among Sahelian societies before the virus emerged, which could spark wider violence.

Covid-19 will further weaken the already fragile legitimacy of central state authorities in the Sahel. The pandemic, as argued by Africa expert Alex de Waal, should be seen as an opportunity to increase consultations with affected communities to find locally acceptable solutions to the virus.<sup>26</sup> In contexts in which central government authorities are considered to have very limited legitimacy, governance needs to be participatory to find local and practicable solutions allowing social tensions to ease.<sup>27</sup> While this endeavour might easily seem overwhelming in a region where legitimacy of state authorities is contested, at times violently, first examples of this practice are starting to emerge in Mali. A new project by the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy aims to facilitate dialogue in order to increase voluntary compliance and strengthen public confidence in government measures.<sup>28</sup> While the project is still in an early stage it signals a step in the right direction and its best practices could serve as a basis for further programming in the region. In the immediate future, policies implemented to contain the pandemic should continue to focus on health measures as well as consistent and clear communication about them. If authorities fail to act on both counts, mistrust and opposition could gain

further momentum amid drastic economic deterioration and limited humanitarian support – ultimately risking wide-spread popular protest, including violence. For the Netherlands and the EU the focus of programming efforts in the Sahel should be both on increasing immediate relief funding for Covid-19 as well as on investing in dialogue and confidence enhancing measures, all the while not forgetting about other ongoing political crises in the region. A positive signal was given by the Dutch parliament on 26 March by adopting a motion that seeks to avoid cuts to existing aid budgets, and increase them where possible.<sup>29</sup> Authorities and international policymakers should not let this crisis go to waste and use Covid-19 to find a new way forward for more inclusive governance in the Sahel.

## Endnotes






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