

# REFLECTIONS ON COVID-19 POLITICS IN UGANDA

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## The Regionalism-Nationalism Tension and COVID-19 Pandemic Politics

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One of the first victims of the COVID-19 pandemic the world over and in Africa is regional integration. When COVID-19 started in [China](#), it seemed quite distant. It then spread in China, a known superpower with extensive footprints across the world. The lockdown in Wuhan - the city where COVID-19 is said to have started and the [supersonic speed construction of hospitals](#) there, at first all seemed surreal and distant for Africa.

On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization then declared COVID-19 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. All hell broke loose. In Africa, many countries started setting up readiness response actions to contain the spread of the virus. Travel restrictions were put in place and some light quarantine restrictions. A few weeks later, readiness turned into all out anti-COVID-19 response as countries started registering cases. Simultaneously, as this pandemic spread, the continent's regional and global public goods started getting tested. These included; global financial stability, global trade and trade logistics, global communication interconnectivity and global public health. Stock exchange markets became volatile, trade deals came to a sudden stop and quickly virtual meeting applications (such as zoom) became alternatives to face to face boardroom meetings.

The pandemic is upending all social and political logic of human society. The virus has no cure. It is moving from the developed to developing world. It is infecting the high and mighty. A head of state, a royal family member and several high ranking personalities have been in and out of intensive care. But also those living below the poverty line are not spared. It is straining even the best health systems in places like the Fashion Capital and

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threatening fragile systems across Africa. Countries have closed borders and stopped flights. The world has literally come to a standstill.

Scientists are telling the world that the pandemic is a respiratory related disease and touching one's mouth, eyes and nose with infected hands is the way the virus spreads. To fight it, health workers advise the world to wash hands, and practice 'social distancing' among other things. Countries are closing geographical borders, yet the border the virus has crossed is a biological border – between the virus and humans. That border is still open and the virus keeps crossing it with a resurgent of cases spreading across the world.

To fight coronavirus, countries need to work together. What is required to defeat COVID-19 is global solidarity and not global solitary confinement. For Africa political management of the pathogen is edging out biomedical management of the pathogen. Security officers are out on the streets of many countries, arresting those who do not comply to draconian pronouncements mainly issued by presidents in countries with questionable democratic credentials.

African health systems on the other hand clearly show they cannot cope with a pandemic. Health officials across Africa know that hospitals can deal with only a fraction of those needing care if the virus spreads through overcrowded cities, rural areas and among vulnerable populations such as refugees. The malnourished or those suffering from HIV and other chronic conditions may not even have to be infected by the virus. Countries are putting their energy into prevention because it is clear that critical care will be an uphill task.

In many countries, actions are being taken as national responses. What is scarce is continental solidarity among countries to defeat the spread of the virus. East Africa, since February 2020, the Ministers of Health in the region [have met twice](#). The Presidents have met only once by May 2020 and each of the countries in East Africa is taking its own prevention measures. In Uganda, President Yoweri Museveni has ordered a total lockdown of the country, a curfew in the night and full deployment of the army and local defense units that started their tour of duty with ferocity only reserved for 'enemies of the state'. In Kenya, the lockdown is on with restrictions similar to Uganda and Rwanda. Tanzania has been the 'odd man out', locking down public institutions and leaving the churches and mosques open so that people can continue to pray the pandemic out of town. Burundi has got some few cases and some response measures that include quarantining of travelers.

While we know that global pandemics are not new in [human history](#), this time round the interconnectivity of the world has made the mobility of pandemics potentially much more devastating. So, we now have a double edged sword, because indeed the success of our human civilization is usually measured by how interconnected we are, yet interconnectedness now is a facilitator of coronavirus pandemic spread.

But it is this same interconnectedness that also reminds us that to fight a pandemic like COVID-19, the world must treat it as a global public concern. Countries must coalesce around regional economic communities to find collective responses. Regional cooperation and responsibility should be manifested in the powers and resources that countries give to regional bodies like the East African Community, Africa Union and institutions like the Africa Center for Disease Control to respond to the virus.

So far, what we see are serious flaws that are apparent in marshalling regional cooperation. For instance, the diversity of actions to respond to the pandemic tell an interesting story. When one looks at the economic actions; countries like Ghana have extended health insurance to all health workers, Senegal is supplementing nurses' salaries, Kenya has removed the fee on mobile money transfers and Ethiopia has increased the amount of money a person can send using mobile money platforms, Uganda is distributing food and is mute about any economic-wide stimulus or recovery plan. But there is no known response that has been adopted at regional or continental level across Africa.

We now see a return to the rhetoric of nationalism. Food nationalism, manufacturing nationalism and even ethnic nationalism is making the rounds – all dangerous gestures and threats to regionalism. For landlocked countries and countries in Africa that largely depend on imports and have interconnected tribal groups across borders this is a dangerous move. Public health experts know that the virus does not discriminate, and the weakest link may become the edifice to bring the house down.

The COVID-19 pandemic requires solidarity in health systems. Vaccines require global collaboration and data on pandemic spread and community manifestation require collaboration across borders. The danger is countries retreating into patronage politics, using the pandemic as a license for plunder of public resources and creating superficial forms of nationalisms (economic, ethnic, food, health). Yet all these nationalisms are not sustainable because - indeed - the world left the stone age long ago and cannot return to the hunter-gatherer life that assures communities of self-sustenance. It is the same inverted logic that refuses to see the need for more collaboration that is also used to see the pandemic as a 'law and order' and not public health issue.

In terms of future scenarios, the writing on the wall suggests several issues. One is that patronage politics is going to continue around the continent with many presidents using the pandemic to grab power over policy and decision-making and entrench political patronage. Several nationalism projects are going to continue, with the disease being ethicized – it is the 'foreigner' that becomes the problem – soft xenophobia will emerge. This is already evident from the way results of those tested of COVID-19 are announced. When a country finds a foreigner among people who have tested positive, the foreigner marker is announced with undertones of a sigh of relief. It is going to be harder to travel across countries with each coming up with stringent measures at their border. How this will curb the disease is unknown, but it will certainly fuel illegal movements and bribery at border posts.

Regionalism may in the end become weaker, as nationalism becomes stronger but unfortunately, nationalism is a passing façade. The rude awakening will come from the economy when bread and butter politics forces citizens to search for food wherever it can be found. The recession will force African countries to pass around the begging bowl in desperate need of aid and new forms of conditionalities will emerge as countries try to squeeze the best deal out of each other.

In a nutshell, while countries are looking for local solutions, global and regional solutions will be more sustainable as they will focus on the global character of the pandemic. Otherwise countries with low infection rates can become islands of excellence with no connecting routes out of the social ramifications of the pandemic.

#### About the Uganda Transition Scenarios Thought Leadership Group – UTSTLG

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