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Global Quarantine VII

Political cooperation can be fragile in times of the coronavirus crisis. Dispatches from Spain, Israel and Kenya

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Read this article in German.

Spain

With almost 200,000 people affected, there are more infected people in Spain than in Italy, and its total of 20,850 deaths is the highest in Europe relative to population size. Although 3 deaths and 260 confirmed cases had already been reported in Spain on 5 March 2020, over 100,000 people took to the streets in Madrid on 8 March for International Women's Day. The very next day all schools and daycare centres were closed. The Madrid region has become an epicentre. For weeks now, the hospital system has been stretched to the limit; an ice rink is serving as temporary storage facility for crematoriums.

The lack of equipment for medical personnel has been the target of much criticism – according to unions, the infection rate among medical workers is 14 per cent, which amounts to a sad record in Europe during this pandemic. The government quickly decided that private clinics should also make their healthcare facilities available to the public health system for clinical diagnosis. Especially after the crisis years of 2009/10, the number of private institutions had increased, a change that was forced by the policies of the then conservative government. The public sector had also been bled dry from years of austerity.

On 13 March, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez declared a state of emergency, the third highest of the levels foreseen in the constitution. As a result, many of the regions' powers were transferred to the government in Madrid. Since then, a very strict countrywide curfew has been nerve-racking for the population. On 28 March, Sánchez announced a tightening of the curfew and the country was ordered into hibernation: workers were forced to take leave, continue to receive their salary and will later have to make up for hours they have not worked. Only urgently required activities are allowed.

Two weeks ago, these restrictions were extended by a further two weeks until 26 April. The curve of the contagion is flattening out and the daily death toll declining. But with 500 cases, it still remains quite high. Therefore, yet another extension of curfew restrictions has not been ruled out. Since 14 April, at least industry and the construction sector have been allowed to resume their activities under certain conditions.

The economic consequences are devastating. Spain had just weathered the aftermath of the 2009/10 financial and real estate crisis; and now the economy is in a free fall worse than before. The IMF estimates that economic growth will drop by 8 per cent and unemployment will skyrocket to 21 per cent. Early on, Premier Sánchez announced a €200bn aid package in order to save the economy and the labour market from the worst effects. Without a majority in parliament, the left-wing coalition of the social-democratic PSOE and left-wing Podemos remains dependent on votes from the opposition.

While at the beginning of the crisis all parties had assured the Spanish government of their solidarity and support regarding the initial curfew restrictions, there are now increasing accusations from the opposition. The president of the conservative PP (People's Party), Pablo Casado, dismisses the government's crisis management as catastrophic. He points to the purchase of Chinese testing kits that turned out to be defective and to IMF's bleak economic forecasts.

The left minority government is looking for a broad consensus to bring the country back on the path of normality and economic recovery. Prime Minister Sanchez has proposed a new 'Moncloa Pact'. Moncloa is the residence and office of the Prime Minister and was the eponym for a bipartisan agreement in 1977 that, after Franco's death, would facilitate Spain's path to democracy, enable reconciliation and promote the establishment of modern democratic institutions. Opposition leader Pablo Casado had initially signalled his willingness to engage in dialogue; but now the old ways of dealing with the conflictive political system are again gaining the upper hand.

Support from the European level would be as important as internal consensus. Against the backdrop of the austerity experiences with the ESM during the financial crisis, Spain and Italy insist on the idea of joint coronabonds.

Gero Maaß, FES Spain

Israel

Hardly a day goes by when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu doesn't speak to Israel's citizens at prime time. He then regularly announces new measures to protect the population: these range from closing off cities or neighbourhoods that have a particularly large number of people infected with Covid-19, to the obligation to wear a mask when leaving the house, to tips on how to use a handkerchief when sneezing.

At the same time, these public statements are also being used to call for the formation of an emergency government. After all, a transitional government has already existed in Israel for over a year. The recent parliamentary elections in early March, like the two last year, did not allow the centre-right or centre-left bloc to achieve a parliamentary majority. A fourth election, in September 2020 for example, would therefore normally be the most likely scenario.

But this does not apply in the times of the corona crisis. Now is the time to stick together and show unity in the fight against the virus. This particular challenge has led to a split in the largest opposition party under Benny Gantz, who is now negotiating with Netanyahu to form a government of national emergency. Nothing has been decided yet, but all indications are that there will be again be another government formed under Netanyahu. This government may even include the social-democratic Israeli Labour Party, which placed far behind in the elections.

The corona crisis has hit Israel hard: as of 20 April, more than 13,600 cases of illness have been reported and 173 people have died from Covid-19. Most of the victims were older people with pre-existing illnesses. Since Sunday, 12 April, Israelis have been required to wear protective masks when they leave their homes. What was previously only a recommendation is now an obligation. The police will enforce the new rules by imposing fines if necessary. A total of 17 localities in Jerusalem and other parts of the country, where the infection rate is above average, have been completely closed off since the beginning of last week. All of them are areas with a predominantly ultra-Orthodox population.

Nationwide, thousands of police officers and soldiers are monitoring compliance, while drones patrol the air. Israel is also tracking the spread of the coronavirus through surveillance of smartphones. The government has authorised domestic intelligence to access the location information of all cell phone users: a controversial measure, but supported by the majority of Israelis.

In the meantime, the number of tests for Covid-19 has decreased because laboratories do not have the chemicals necessary for the evaluation. This complicates an exit strategy, because currently there are only a few reliable figures on new infections. There is still no clear plan for when life will return to normal for the people of Israel, nor for steps to be taken to return to the time before the corona outbreak. Many criticise the policy to not make the anti-corona measures transparent. Despite the government's vague announcement that some relief will begin after the Passover holidays, this will apparently not come to pass.

The economy is virtually paralysed. The unemployment rate has risen from 3.6 to 25 per cent within just a few weeks; thousands of businesses, especially SMEs, are facing economic collapse. There is a government aid package, but it is rather modest compared to other western countries.

But there is also hope. Despite the devastating electoral defeat of the left, a wave of solidarity has started to move since the curfew was imposed – particularly among social-democratic youth movements, progressive women's associations, civil society organisations in Arab society and the trade unions. On the one hand, the spread of the Covid-19 virus is to be curbed by public information programmes and the social effects of the spike in unemployment are to be absorbed; on the other hand, an exit strategy is to be prepared for a resumption of economic life that is consistent with the welfare state.

Micky Drill, FES Israel

Kenya

Signs of the potential effects of the corona crisis on the Kenyan health system and the economy, as well as on socio-political cohesion, are ominous. However, these are expected to hit the country hard only once the crisis curves have already flattened elsewhere. At the same time, they can be influenced through political means. This requires international solidarity and measures to combat both the virus and inequality in the country.

The Kenyan healthcare system is currently unable to cope with a rapidly increasing number of cases. So far, there are over 270 confirmed cases with an unclear number of unrecorded cases. Several hundred intensive care patients would be difficult to care for. Moreover, there are the economic consequences of the global corona crisis, which are already having an immediate impact in Kenya: the country depends on the export of coffee, tea and flowers, along with tourism. All of these sectors are dependent on international demand and the corresponding transport infrastructures. And both of these are currently suspended indefinitely. People are losing their jobs. There is no unemployment insurance and many are not covered by health insurance either. In addition, capital flight is taking place, which affects almost all developing countries.

Deglobalisation, which is highly noticeable during the corona crisis, hits a country like Kenya particularly hard. Economic growth could collapse by more than three per cent in a country where, even in normal times, more than half a million people enter the labour market every year – people who were hardly able to find jobs even before the corona crisis. At the same time, the fiscal leeway and thus the state's ability to act are particularly limited. This is also because of high international debt, which among other things is caused by the construction of overpriced and corruption-prone prestige projects.

In order to combat the spread of the virus, the government currently wants a night curfew, a ban on entering and leaving the Nairobi and Mombasa metropolitan areas, the suspension of international air traffic, strict quarantine requirements for people who have previously entered Kenya and an order that people work from home. The difficulty of enforcing a curfew was immediately apparent right at the start, when the Kenyan media reported attacks by security forces on people who did not make it home early enough.

While the media reports possible Covid-19 infections on the part of national MPs, the worst consequences are to be feared among poorer urban residents. In particular, the spread of the virus in the huge informal settlements of the big cities would bring dire consequences with it. Over 60 per cent of the population of the capital Nairobi live in such settlements, which make up less than 10 per cent of the city's area. The substantial majority of city dwellers work in precarious conditions, mostly in the informal sector, without employment contracts or social security.

While the national elite and international expats can pay their way into private clinics in the capital during the corona emergency, this will not be affordable for the vast majority of Kenyans. Escaping into the countryside was not a good option and in any case is no longer possible. Out there, the health system is much worse. Harvests have become more uncertain because of climate change and currently due to the swarming of locusts spreading again. This demonstrates how an acute health crisis overlaps with other crises.

Dealing with the coronavirus is also a social issue in Kenya. A complete lockdown would be life-threatening for employees in the informal sector because their daily earnings go straight to food and rent. It is not possible for them to accumulate backup reserves.

While rediscovering social solidarity and developing a new understanding of the need for public goods are positive side effects of the corona crisis in Europe, in Kenya the virus could pose an immediate risk to social cohesion. Access to an intensive care unit depends on personal finances, which have shrunk because of the austerity policy of recent years. At the same time, hardly any public services are available because of the privatisation induced by pressure from the World Bank starting in the 1980s. It is difficult for any social solidarity to form under these circumstances.

This is why the coronavirus has political consequences. Kenya is a heterogeneous, unequal, but still democratic society. Confidence in the government has declined following the controversial 2017 elections, corruption scandals, an economic policy that creates barely any jobs and continuing high inequality. This has jeopardised two prerequisites for dealing with the corona crisis, which in other countries are considered crucial for successfully dealing with the pandemic: a well-established state supply and a high level of trust in the government. In view of these conditions, the Kenyan government's handling of the crisis is being monitored particularly closely.

Kenya, however, would be the only democracy in the region to have any advantages in overcoming the Corona crisis. In a place where intensive care medicine is scarce and social distancing is difficult in crowded slums, having open access to distribution channels, preventive measures, and income compensation are all the more important. This is where the government and Kenyan civil society can work together. One decisive advantage in Kenia is that the media report openly, a critical civil society can request information and measures to contain the virus, and unions are free to provide a socially balanced response to the Corona crisis, e.g. the use of cash transfers. These are all early warning and dialogue mechanisms that other countries in the region do not have. These mechanisms also need to be supported internationally.

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