



CHAPTER 1

The Human, Economic, Social, and Political Costs of COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

The origins and evolution of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) can be traced back to the Chinese province of Hubei, where the first cases were identified in December 2019.¹ The World Health Organization Director-General officially declared a global pandemic on 11 March 2020 as the virus spread rapidly around the world.² The virus initially took hold in Western Europe and the United States, with disproportionate spread in specific high-traffic cities that serve as transportation hubs for international travel. Some studies suggest that SARS-CoV-2 genomes might have already been present in Spanish wastewater from as far back as March 2019³ and in Italy from December 2019.⁴ This chapter offers an overview of the human, economic, social, and political costs of the pandemic in order to prepare the ground for our analysis of the implications of COVID-19 for civility in the remainder of the book.

THE HUMAN COST

The human cost of COVID-19 is significant, yet its true scale is still uncertain. In addition to its immediate negative health effects, it is likely that the pandemic will also lead to a number of long-term health problems such as persistent pulmonary damage, post-viral fatigue, and chronic cardiac complications.⁵ Furthermore, researchers have already connected policies aimed at reducing the spread of COVID-19 through social

isolation to other negative outcomes, such as a spike in suicide rates.⁶ Moreover, it has become apparent that COVID-19 is having disproportionate effects on specific subsections of the population in many of the countries affected. Factors may include age, race and ethnicity, class, and gender, among others. It is well known, for example, that older people face a higher risk of experiencing severe illness from COVID-19.⁷ In many countries, aged care facilities have become hotspots of infection and residents experienced higher-than-average death rates.⁸ Gender also seems to be a factor in mortality rates. There is growing evidence that men are more likely to die from COVID-19 than women, although the reasons are not yet clear.⁹ Furthermore, public health experts estimate disproportionate effects on maternal and child mortality rates in lower- and middle-income countries as a direct result of the virus, the subsequent strain on health systems, and reduced access to food.¹⁰

When it comes to race and ethnicity, some groups have been affected more than others. For example, black Americans have been disproportionately susceptible to infection and died at higher rates early on in the pandemic.¹¹ The Center for Disease Control (CDC) in the US found that racial and ethnic minority groups have been particularly affected by COVID-19 due to such diverse factors as discrimination; low levels of health insurance, access, and service utilization; disproportionate representation in occupations with greater exposure to COVID-19; educational, income, and wealth inequalities; and housing conditions that render prevention strategies more difficult to implement.¹² Other categories of vulnerable people who have been especially affected by COVID-19 include prisoners,¹³ as well as asylum seekers and refugees in camps and detention centres.¹⁴

Social class has also had a profound effect on the ability of people to protect themselves or recover from the virus. Data suggest, for example, that wealthier people have the resources to better adhere to social distancing policies and norms; are less likely to suffer from pre-existing health conditions; can more easily afford to stock up on food, medical, hygiene, and cleaning supplies; and are more likely to perform higher-skilled jobs that allow them to work from home.¹⁵ At the extreme end of the wealth spectrum, global elites have been able to stockpile supplies and make use of remote properties¹⁶ or yachts¹⁷ to isolate from broader society during the pandemic.

Socio-economic inequalities have had an impact on the effects of COVID-19 not only within individual countries, but also on a global

scale. Many lower- and middle-income countries face significant economic contractions in terms of growth and income levels as a result of the pandemic.¹⁸ However, the challenges go beyond economic production and outputs. In some cases, healthcare systems already under stress have faced additional pressure. Furthermore, in the case of India, to cite just one example, the government has had a limited capacity to reach rural areas and experienced political pressure to limit testing to keep official case tallies low.¹⁹ The effects have been disastrous, with infection rates and death tolls well beyond the reported numbers. This will have carry-on effects on social welfare services aimed at those in need as resources are diverted to help combat the pandemic. But there are also success stories. Cuba, for example, has been able to respond to the pandemic promptly and efficiently, at least compared to other countries in the Caribbean and their Central and South American neighbours. Its free universal healthcare system proved crucial, combined with the highest doctor-to-population ratio in the world and the presence of an efficient national emergency planning structure.²⁰

THE ECONOMIC COST

In addition to the human costs, COVID-19 has also taken a significant toll on the global economy, particularly due to severe travel restrictions and lockdown measures aimed at reducing its spread. A significant number of workers across various sectors have lost their jobs, and this trend is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.²¹ From early on, the World Bank predicted the worst global recession since WWII, with the global economy expected to shrink drastically.²²

The pandemic has also disrupted international trade relationships. For example, it rendered post-Brexit trade negotiations between the United Kingdom (UK) and the European Union (EU) more challenging²³ and has exacerbated existing tensions in the trade relationship between the United States (US) and China.²⁴ Furthermore, some regional markets (e.g. in Latin America) are experiencing significant economic downturns as a result of the pandemic.²⁵ Moreover, financial markets have become increasingly volatile²⁶ and the pandemic has also significantly disrupted global supply chains.²⁷ Economic downturns in states like Victoria, Australia may be especially strong compared to other parts of the country. Waves of coronavirus cases have resulted in border closures that make

interstate and international migration nearly impossible in Australia. The tourism, hospitality, and education sectors that rely heavily on migrant labour and international travel have been the most affected.²⁸

Some sectors of the economy have been particularly affected by the pandemic and are experiencing significant contraction, as is the case with higher education. In some countries, such as the US, the UK, and Australia, many universities rely heavily (from a financial point of view) on the recruitment of international students, who generally pay higher enrolment fees than their domestic counterparts. Travel and visa restrictions during the pandemic have resulted in withdrawals and lower enrolment numbers among international students, with significant financial implications for the universities most affected.²⁹

The creative arts sector has also struggled to cope with and adapt to the pandemic. Many music venues, theatres, and cinemas around the world were forced to keep their doors closed in the first half of 2020 due to social distancing rules and to reduce risks associated with the spread of COVID-19 in indoor environments. Some places reintroduced these measures during subsequent waves of the pandemic. The music industry has been significantly affected, with shows and festivals cancelled and album releases postponed.³⁰ Unable to perform in person, production companies have had to reimagine theatrical performances for online audiences that still want to see a live show.³¹ Furthermore, many major theatres and opera houses across the world have made some of their performances freely available to the public via online streaming platforms.³² The global film industry has also been severely hit by the pandemic, with many cinemas closed, film festivals cancelled or moved online, and significant delays in the release of major motion pictures for fears that studios would be unable to recoup investments.³³ The movie industry has been forced to evolve as movie theatre chains have responded to these challenges by negotiating agreements with movie studios on how to release films and charge audiences for access.³⁴ In some cases, cinemas have tried to adapt to the new social distancing rules by rearranging their spaces and implementing strict health and safety checks.³⁵ In other cases, we have witnessed unexpected changes, such as the revival of drive-in cinemas.³⁶

The transportation sector will also feel the economic impact of the pandemic for the foreseeable future. Industry experts forecast a record-breaking financial loss for the commercial aviation sector. International

flights in and out of many countries have been severely restricted, demand for air travel has plummeted, and airlines must take costly safety precautions to limit proximity to other passengers such as leaving middle seats empty. Cruise ship operators have not been immune to the pandemic either, especially due to people's concerns regarding difficulties in abiding by social distancing rules in confined spaces.³⁷ Likewise, those working in the 'gig economy' as drivers for rideshare services like Uber or Lyft face restrictions and lowered demand for service.³⁸ Yet, some industry operators have benefitted from changing travel patterns and preferences among the general public. For example, sleeper trains have regained popularity among European travellers who are reluctant to fly between different cities and countries.³⁹

Relatedly, the tourism industry faces unprecedented economic challenges due to travel restrictions and lower levels of disposable income among consumers who have been financially hit by the pandemic, resulting in hundreds of billions US\$ in losses across the sector.⁴⁰ The hotel industry has suffered similar hardships due to a sharp decline in hotel bookings.⁴¹ COVID-19 will force the entire tourism industry to rethink its focus and priorities to reduce susceptibility to shocks related to the pandemic and looming crises tied to global warming.⁴² The public may be forced to reimagine how it travels and start to prioritize local destinations, transforming the economic outlook of the sector.⁴³

The restaurant and food services sectors have faced significant obstacles to profitability, and many businesses have been forced to shutter their doors. In some cases, the government has stepped in to force temporary closures or implement measures that require significant adjustments to a standard restaurant business model. Restaurants have had to contend with a severe reduction in consumer demand, a lower capacity to seat patrons, and unexpected expenditures to address safety concerns like adding plastic partitions to protect staff or redesigning seating arrangements, sometimes by prioritizing outdoors spaces.⁴⁴ Many of them have adapted to this new environment by finding new ways to reach their customers. For example, an employee at one restaurant in Melbourne explained:

We knew that our restaurants would be very quiet so we immediately pushed our online orders when COVID-19 restrictions came into play. We're lucky that we manufacture all our own pasta, sauces, pizzas and other products so pushing [these products] through clever marketing worked well for us. We introduced our 'Door-to-Door Service' which saw us

visiting various suburbs on various days and this was very well received... It's something our customers love and therefore something we'll continue even when restrictions lift... We also decided to hold an online event. Like a dinner dance, but streamed online where customers purchase tickets to watch the entertainment and then they also have the option of purchasing a dinner pack that's delivered to them before the event. This has also been well received.⁴⁵

Following the easing of restrictions after the first wave of the pandemic, some governments stepped in to provide financial support for the industry by encouraging people to dine out.⁴⁶ Cafes and the coffee industry have also been negatively impacted from an economic perspective.⁴⁷ Conversely, grocery stores have generally benefited from changes in consumer behaviour as more people eat at home. However, they have also had to adapt their business model to the changing retail environment, prioritizing online shopping, expanding delivery services, and even exploring the potential to introduce mobile stores to replace brick-and-mortar markets.⁴⁸

The sports industry has also been significantly affected by the pandemic, with major sporting events cancelled or postponed all over the world. Mass gatherings and large-scale events generate crowds where the risk of COVID-19 transmission rises exponentially. In March 2020, Japan's Prime Minister and the president of the International Olympic Committee announced the postponement of the 2020 Tokyo Games, marking the first time the Olympics have been rescheduled for a reason other than war.⁴⁹ The pandemic has forced diverse forms of professional and college sports leagues to halt play or devise alternative ways to reach audiences if they are to weather the storm. Many leagues and franchises have been unable to generate previous levels of advertising revenue because of postponements and find themselves in dire financial straits. Players themselves have been apprehensive about resuming play and moving forward with seasons. Sports like Major League Baseball could suffer losses in the billions of dollars, leading to tense negotiations between team owners and players regarding compensation and risk, with some asking whether athletes should be seen as 'exploited workers or greedy millionaires'.⁵⁰ US and Australian rules football leagues have faced similar challenges, with some players simply deciding to opt out.⁵¹ Football (soccer) leagues throughout Europe made the decision to simply

suspend or cancel their seasons in 2020.⁵² When play resumed, it generally occurred behind closed doors. As sports teams and players suffer the financial costs of these disruptions, the public should be aware of the disparate capacity elite men's clubs may have to contend with the financial challenges compared to women's clubs, as is the case of English football.⁵³

The agricultural sector has also faced considerable challenges. At the early stages of the pandemic, the prices of agricultural goods fell significantly, particularly due to lower demand from hotels and restaurants.⁵⁴ While growing demand from grocery stores seems to have gradually offset those initial losses, farmers face new difficulties resulting from labour shortages and from the need to adapt to new social distancing rules.⁵⁵ Labour shortages may also result in higher prices for fruit and vegetables.⁵⁶ Furthermore, the meat industry has been particularly hard-hit by the pandemic. Many meat-processing plants have been the epicentres of COVID-19 outbreaks, resulting in shutdowns and meat shortages in the food supply chain.⁵⁷

In addition to the areas examined in the foregoing analysis, other sectors that have been affected by COVID-19 include the manufacturing industry, the financial sector, the healthcare and pharmaceutical industry, and the real estate and housing sector.⁵⁸ Other businesses on the economic fringes have also been hard-hit, especially those related to vice. For example, gambling hotspots in Las Vegas had to shutter their doors for some time, but gambling online has thrived even while sports betting has declined.⁵⁹ Illicit drug trafficking and local distribution markets have faced novel challenges in supply chain and consumer demand too.⁶⁰

Sex workers have also been affected by the social distancing restrictions implemented during the pandemic, given the central role that physical contact plays in the industry. Moreover, the stigma and discrimination that those working in this industry already experience has increased during the pandemic, further contributing to economic hardship across the sector. Some have responded by either demanding government support or by adapting their business model to emphasize other online services.⁶¹ The Australian Sex Workers Association clearly articulated the difficulties for sex workers who have been 'placed in the impossible position of having to balance the need to protect [them]selves and the community against the prospect of no income and no access to financial relief'.⁶²

THE SOCIAL COST

In addition to its extensive economic implications, COVID-19 has also had a drastic effect on social life around the globe. Government measures related to social distancing rules, stay-at-home orders, business lockdowns, and curfews have in many cases eroded community relationships by drastically reducing opportunities for physical face-to-face interaction. These measures have significantly affected family life, both by increasing proximity among those forced to shared confined spaces during lockdowns⁶³ and by keeping families apart to prevent risk of infection. For example, one grandmother we spoke with who lives in California described what interactions with her granddaughter looked like during the pandemic:

[My husband and I] were both looking at her and she's looking at us and she's hugging a dolly. And they're through the glass. It was her birthday. And she came up to the glass, she puts her hand up [to ours] and she kissed the glass and I kissed the glass. We kissed each other through the glass and it was just heart-wrenching... I said, 'I wish I could hug you, I miss you, I'm gonna throw you kisses'. We would go out into the yard and we stayed far away. We kind of did it all. [At first] we just did FaceTime. Then we started between the windows—we could at least see her there.⁶⁴

Likewise, a grandmother in Italy whom we also interviewed explained:

The pandemic has taken away spontaneity from normal gestures of affection. There is fear but, at the same time, there is also a desire to hug grandchildren, children, and friends during the lockdown. [The pandemic] has taken away physical contact and people have had to replace this with video calls or messages, both with relatives and friends, in an attempt to exercise fear.⁶⁵

The pandemic has clearly rendered relationships among family and friends more difficult for many.⁶⁶ However, it has also brought some people closer together thanks to greater flexibility in time schedules, alternative working arrangements, and reduced opportunities for other social activities.⁶⁷ Relationships with both family and friends have also been sustained by the use of communication technologies during the pandemic.⁶⁸ Furthermore, social media have played a key role in reducing isolation for both older⁶⁹ and younger⁷⁰ people, even though these platforms have also contributed to spreading rumours and misinformation.⁷¹

Romantic relationships and dating have also had to adapt to the new social distancing and travel restrictions. Some dating apps, for example, have altered user guidelines and introduced new video technology options so users can continue to interact with others while minimizing risks and adhering to social distancing guidelines.⁷² More generally, COVID-19 has had an impact on romantic love,⁷³ and in some cases contributed to increasing stress among romantic partners, compounding factors that may lead to greater infidelity.⁷⁴ Big social events like weddings had to be postponed in places like metropolitan Melbourne, Australia during its strict Stage 4 lockdown.⁷⁵

Relationships between humans and non-human animals, and social practices surrounding them, have also been impacted. For example, data show that there has been a significant increase in pet ownership and adoption, as pets help reduce stress and loneliness, or encourage healthier and more active lifestyles.⁷⁶ There has also been contention around the implications of the pandemic for certain animals. For example, the dog racing industry in Victoria, Australia saw an exemption from strict Stage 4 lockdown measures amid debates about potential animal welfare issues.⁷⁷

The pandemic has also resulted in a housing crisis, as many people can no longer afford their rent or mortgage payments, thus risking eviction and homelessness.⁷⁸ This has sometimes generated extreme and violent responses.⁷⁹ In other cases, it has compounded pre-existing social harms like increased violence between intimate partners and other forms of abuse. Early indicators show that households in Brazil, Spain, the UK, and Cyprus saw spikes in domestic and family violence.⁸⁰ A study in Dallas, Texas found a spike in domestic violence during the first two weeks of the stay-at-home order that subsided afterwards.⁸¹ The long-term isolation, stress, and uncertainty during the pandemic may also exacerbate alcohol and drug consumption. Furthermore, these conditions can increase the likelihood of relapse among recovering alcoholics and drug addicts too.⁸² There has also been a rise in online gambling.⁸³

COVID-19 has also changed social practices in various everyday environments due to the need to re-imagine spaces and people's interaction within them in ways that comply with social distancing norms.⁸⁴ There are obvious logistical challenges to in-person education and how to manage students on school campuses. Options have included a combination of closures and social distancing practices.⁸⁵ Educational institutions now rely on online learning to a greater degree, raising new challenges.⁸⁶ For example, we spoke with a school teacher in Italy who explained that

the transition to distance learning had several advantages, but suffered from a number of shortcomings. The new teaching format was not always suitable for younger pupils or students with disabilities. Furthermore, online teaching tended to sharpen the ‘digital divide’ between families with different levels of access to suitable spaces in the home, tablets, and highspeed Internet connections. He also described ongoing unruly behaviour and cheating among students, then added:

When our school reopened... the space was reorganized with single-seat desks... pupils always had to wear surgical masks and could only remove them in ‘static’ moments, sitting at their desks. They could not move nor could they pass materials among themselves... The interaction between teachers also profoundly changed. Teachers used to gather in the faculty lounge, which could no longer be used due to COVID-19. Opportunities for meetings and interactions with colleagues were clearly reduced; at the same time, teachers began to meet in online spaces like Google Meet, especially to share teaching practices. Yet, the ability to interact was decidedly reduced.⁸⁷

Universities have also been forced to adjust courses and curricula for online delivery. While this is practically feasible, students may have fewer opportunities to participate in the off-line social networking that is crucial for career development.⁸⁸ Furthermore, many universities may not survive the financial hit resulting from the pandemic.⁸⁹

The pandemic has also affected the way people eat and drink. Restaurants, for example, have had to undergo several changes, including redesigning their spaces, accommodating lower numbers of customers in order to respect social distancing rules, making greater use of smart technologies (e.g. for menus and meal orders), and expanding their takeaway and delivery services.⁹⁰ Some of them have adopted creative strategies in order to guarantee social distancing between patrons.⁹¹

Likewise, government restrictions have forced some bars to close for extended periods of time in many locations. Those that have reopened or remained open had to reimagine how they serve customers and manage interactions between staff and patrons. Complex rules around indoor and outdoor spaces, as well as food service as it relates to the sale of alcohol, affect whether we visit these establishments and our experiences while there.⁹² An array of ‘multi-touch’ items like menus, salt and pepper shakers, cutlery, and coasters are now kept away from customers.⁹³ One Irish pub in Spain’s Canary Islands used humour to communicate some of

the real dangers associated with social practices in bars, putting up a notice that patrons should avoid singing the Neil Diamond hit ‘Sweet Caroline’ at all costs. Employees wrote some lyrics on a chalkboard explaining that, as a health precaution under COVID-19, ‘[t]here will be no: touching hands, reaching out, touching me, touching you’.⁹⁴

Cafes have been forced to respond to the pandemic in creative ways as well, with some selling their stock as groceries and expanding their takeaway and delivery services.⁹⁵ Furthermore, in many countries the pandemic has undermined the role of cafes as ‘third spaces’ between home and work, crucial for socializing and networking.⁹⁶ The pandemic may have long-term effects on coffee culture around the globe.

Barbershops and hairdressers have also been at the epicentre of public debate concerning lockdown measures during the pandemic, with disagreement as to whether they constitute ‘essential’ businesses that should be exempt from lockdown restrictions. Barbershops traditionally serve important social functions for some cultural groups as spaces for community building, leisure and entertainment, gossip and local political engagement,⁹⁷ as well as local education initiatives.⁹⁸ They can also be important for men’s mental health.⁹⁹ Likewise, hair salons can provide ‘a comforting source of self-care and community’¹⁰⁰ and serve as ‘an important channel between members of the community and services such as family violence shelters’.¹⁰¹ This partly explains why many customers opposed and, in some cases, managed to revert government decisions to close down these businesses during the pandemic.¹⁰² In one extreme case, an armed militia group helped keep a barbershop open in a small US town in the state of Michigan.¹⁰³

Beyond its direct effect on people’s health, COVID-19 has also indirectly affected people’s ability to stay healthy. For example, lockdown and social distancing restrictions aimed at reducing its spread have changed the way people exercise,¹⁰⁴ with online streaming classes and programmes becoming a popular way for people to connect and participate in workout activities.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, when they have not been forced to close down, gyms have had to comply with strict health and safety measures, including the introduction of ‘hygiene marshals’.¹⁰⁶ Partly due to risks associated with exercising in closed spaces, outdoor exercise has become increasingly popular.¹⁰⁷ However, research shows that overeating and other unhealthy eating behaviours have also increased, thus posing additional challenges to individual and public health.¹⁰⁸

The pandemic has affected other areas of social life related to leisure and recreation. Event-based social networks like Meetup, for example, have been forced to transition to virtual platforms in order to interact.¹⁰⁹ A recent study in Australia found that activities within Meetup decreased by 86% during the pandemic. The researcher explains:

Participants in this study mentioned that Meetup was one of the main avenues in which they were exposed to new, potential relationships and that, due to lockdown measures, they had no way of expanding their social networks and thus making new friends. COVID-19 also had an amplifying effect on existing relationships within Meetup groups in the sense that close relationships became closer, and weak ones, weaker. Where relationships were strong enough, participants often used other social networking sites such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram to maintain contact during lockdown, which highlights the importance of polymedia use.¹¹⁰

The way people travel for holidays and tourism has also changed.¹¹¹ For example, both customers and business owners at beach destinations face unprecedented challenges that include new social distancing rules as well as stigma and public shaming for those who fail to respect them.¹¹² People's ability to access and experience national¹¹³ and local¹¹⁴ parks, as well as public spaces more generally,¹¹⁵ has also been deeply affected by the pandemic.

Travelling by public transport now includes additional demands to maintain social distance on crowded buses and subways. Passengers must also take new precautions to avoid handles and other surfaces that could spread the virus. Forward-thinking researchers will need to develop safer public transport infrastructure¹¹⁶ and new transport technologies to prevent an unsustainable shift back to a car-driven transport system.¹¹⁷ When it comes to pedestrians, proposed measures to contain the spread of the virus include touchless pedestrian crossings¹¹⁸ and crowd simulation technology to encourage social distancing.¹¹⁹ Rideshare services such as Uber have had to find ways of responding to reduced customer demand. For example, at times they have emphasized food delivery rather than taxi service to help keep drivers working and to mitigate issues of food insecurity.¹²⁰ However, disruptions to their business model have had important social implications for sectors of the population with disabilities who normally depend on rideshare transportation services.¹²¹

The broader social effects of COVID-19 also concern the tensions that may arise between different individuals and social groups. Instances of social hoarding were particularly common at the onset of the pandemic, with people fighting over such products as toilet paper, hand sanitizer, flour, and pasta in shops and supermarkets.¹²² There have also been incidents of extreme rage over facemask policies, leading to the death of innocent bystanders and fatal confrontations with law enforcement.¹²³ Furthermore, ageism and intergenerational tensions are on the rise in online spaces, especially between the ‘millennial’ and ‘baby boomer’ generations.¹²⁴ Social stigma targeting infected people and those who have recovered from the illness, as well as doctors and health workers, has also become a widespread phenomenon.¹²⁵ COVID-19 has also fuelled racism and xenophobia.¹²⁶ Hate speech, hate crimes, and discriminatory practices targeting people with Chinese and East Asian backgrounds,¹²⁷ Muslims,¹²⁸ Jews,¹²⁹ and Romani communities¹³⁰ have been especially common. At the international level, the pandemic has generated negative attitudes towards countries with high levels of infections.¹³¹ One study, for example, revealed spikes in incivility directed at China on South Korean social media.¹³²

THE POLITICAL COST

The global pandemic has generated a range of international and domestic political problems. The COVID-19 health crisis constitutes an exogenous shock to the broader international system, disrupting international politics and creating new tensions between adversaries and allies alike. It will undoubtedly have profound implications for and lasting effects on geopolitics for years to come.¹³³ Political leaders from major powers like the US and China may seek to use the crisis to find advantage in an ongoing contest for hegemony in the global political order.¹³⁴ In many contexts, states have been left scrambling to secure sufficient supplies and resources to effectively contend with the virus, prioritizing national interest and the well-being of their own citizens. The US, for example, requested that the firm 3M refrain from selling protective masks to Canada and countries in Latin America to keep them for domestic use.¹³⁵ A form of ‘vaccine nationalism’ took hold in a race to develop a vaccine for the virus that created barriers to cooperation and prioritized domestic delivery when mass production got underway.¹³⁶

The pandemic has the potential to exacerbate ongoing political conflicts between states. For example, COVID-19 risks inflaming tensions between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. As political leaders in both countries focus on fighting the virus, we could see further entrenchment of the militarized status quo, as well as local efforts to highlight the inadequacy of Indian governance in Kashmir. There is the potential that hardline Indian nationalist policies might be used to divert public attention from the COVID-19 crisis. However, the scale of the pandemic threat will most likely shift attention in India and Pakistan to the immediate demands of public health services and the need to alleviate economic hardship domestically.¹³⁷

Polities with supranational governance structures like the European Union have experienced discord over new policies. EU member states eventually managed to compromise on an economic recovery plan in July 2020, despite tensions during the negotiation process, especially due to concerns of so-called ‘frugal’ countries about the cost of the plan.¹³⁸ However, tensions within the EU have also been driven by disputes concerning seasonal migrant labour, with some business, especially farmers, demanding access to foreign workers, and some populist leaders calling instead for tighter restrictions on immigration.¹³⁹

The pandemic has also compounded pre-existing international problems related to the movement of people. Asylum seekers and refugees have been particularly affected,¹⁴⁰ especially since the pandemic risks exacerbating existing humanitarian crises.¹⁴¹ The pandemic has also had an impact on temporary economic migrants, particularly as a result of the economic downturn that has forced many companies to lay off employees. Even when governments have introduced economic measures to support businesses, temporary migrants have often been excluded from these programmes.¹⁴² Some governments are also considering changes to migration rules¹⁴³ and taking drastic steps in modifying the way they address asylum claims, including limitations to face-to-face interviews, introducing new physical barriers, or even encouraging applicants to ‘bring [their] own black or blue ink pens’.¹⁴⁴ Internal migration has also been affected by the pandemic, as many governments have imposed restrictions on internal travel.¹⁴⁵

The public health crisis is also affecting domestic political divisions in multiple contexts. For example, during post-Brexit negotiations between the UK and the EU, some politicians exploited the pandemic for partisan political gain.¹⁴⁶ In some cases, politicians have challenged

the authority of experts, undermining citizens' trust in evidence-based knowledge.¹⁴⁷ They have also mischaracterized or appropriated scientific expertise around issues like mask wearing to advance their positions.¹⁴⁸ Debate about the pandemic in some countries has been driven by and exacerbated pre-existing political polarization, stoking tensions between regional/state and national/federal political authorities. However, calls for unity and coordinated action has sometimes also helped to reduce ideological and partisan divides.¹⁴⁹

The pandemic poses unique challenges to state stability and could compound risks of political violence, internal armed conflict, and incidents of state failure. Rebel groups and other militant actors have seized opportunities to expand control, advance political objectives, and demonstrate a capacity to govern and enforce rules. For example, armed actors operating along the southwest coast of Colombia made public declarations that curfew violators would be treated as 'military targets'.¹⁵⁰ COVID-19 has provided a chance for armed opposition groups to scale up attacks and target government opponents in some cases, while in others groups have seized on the opportunity to improve claims of legitimacy and demonstrate their capacity to provide public services and govern. For example, the Islamic State, the Taliban, and al-Qaeda affiliates have all provided guidance and local support to contend with the pandemic.¹⁵¹

Political participation has also been affected by the pandemic. Protest politics, for example, has been at the epicentre of public debate. On the one hand, citizens in some countries have taken to the streets to protest against government restrictions to contain the virus, such as lockdown and stay-at-home orders.¹⁵² On the other hand, protests such as those organized by Black Lives Matter activists around the world became a topic of contention as citizens and political leaders disagreed as to whether those gatherings may have contributed to new COVID-19 outbreaks.¹⁵³

The effects on political participation also extend to electoral politics. For example, in some countries local and national political authorities decided to postpone elections¹⁵⁴ or reimagine electoral procedures and practices. Governments have taken steps like increasing the use of postal voting¹⁵⁵ or introducing measures to guarantee social distancing, health, and safety during the voting process.¹⁵⁶ There has also been an impact on campaign practices due to the need to restrict traditional rituals and habits like shaking hands.¹⁵⁷ Furthermore, political rallies constitute extreme

health risks for the spread of the virus.¹⁵⁸ This point became especially prominent after former US President Donald Trump resumed large political campaign events shortly after his hospitalisation from COVID-19 treatment.¹⁵⁹ Other politicians experimented with virtual rallies and events to mark important milestones in campaigns like the Democratic Party's announcement of a presidential candidate in August 2020.¹⁶⁰ The content of political campaigns and party politics has also evolved as a result of COVID-19. Issues such as public health and socio-economic and racial inequality, for example, have become more salient,¹⁶¹ and parties traditionally divided over fiscal responsibility and public spending have sometimes converged on more similar positions.¹⁶²

Trust is an important aspect of political life as it relates to politicians, law enforcement, and the media, among others. High-profile incidents of politicians who ignore their own stay-at-home orders¹⁶³ or who publicly contradict or undermine health experts¹⁶⁴ can lead to general confusion and the erosion of trust in public officials. The politicization of issues like mandatory mask wearing illustrates how a lack of consensus and divergent policies can frustrate public health measures and lead to greater distrust not only towards politicians but also towards law enforcement officials tasked with ensuring compliance. In extreme cases, law violators have lashed out in violence against police officers enforcing these new laws.¹⁶⁵ In a particularly sensational case, members of an extremist militia were arrested in relation to alleged plans to kidnap Michigan's Governor and put her on 'trial' for restrictive pandemic policies.¹⁶⁶ Furthermore, the media can have a compounding effect on public trust (or lack thereof), by employing framing techniques¹⁶⁷ or prioritising specific content as they deliver information to the public.¹⁶⁸ Social media can further complicate political trust, as they are a popular channel for politicians to spread misinformation about COVID-19 and related policies.¹⁶⁹

CONCLUSION

This chapter provided an overview of the human, economic, social, and political costs of the pandemic. The world faces unprecedented challenges related to COVID-19, including an immense strain on relationships and the way people interact with one another in different aspects of their lives. Uncertainty and disruptions to social and political life will require a better understanding as to how the broader public needs to prepare and respond. Politicians and other decision-makers will face increasing

pressure to come up with policies that are effective at containing the pandemic, limiting its economic impact, and minimising harmful social and political consequences. They face the difficult task of balancing diverse interests, values, and demands, while also having to ensure that they rely on sound scientific evidence. In the remainder of this book, we will examine all these challenges through the lens of civility.

NOTES

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