
COVID-19: A Colossal Threat to Fundamental Rights of Humans

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Abstract

It is quite apparent that the outbreak of COVID-19 otherwise known as Coronavirus is accompanied by a series of issues. And without equivocation, one of the issues is the threat the virus is posing to the fundamental rights of human beings. In respect to what is stipulated in the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, humans have the right to life, freedom of worship, freedom of movement, right to education, freedom of opinion, and expression, etc. The rights and freedoms are originally intrinsic, basic, and inalienable. They are the sine qua non for a peaceful and just world. Contrariwise, COVID-19 is suffocating these rights, the cardinal rights of humans. Howbeit, data for this study is generated from secondary sources for an effective analysis of how the novel virus is affecting the fundamental rights of humans.

Keywords: COVID-19, Threat, Fundamental Human Rights.

Introduction

COVID-19 is not the first and probably would not be the last pandemic humanity would witness. In the time past, we've witnessed serious pandemics such as the Plague or Black Death, Influenza, Smallpox, HIV/AIDS, and so forth. These pandemics, of course, shook the world in their peculiar ways as they claimed millions and millions of lives globally. As for Coronavirus, something similar is the case.

Economically speaking, for example, COVID-19 is seeking to shatter the economies of most nations. It is also trying to drag the world into serious recession as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) notes that the "Great Lockdown" that came with the virus is causing the GDP per capita of 170 nations to shrink¹. The agency, in January 2020, forecast that the global economy would grow by 3.3 percent in 2020; but with the seriousness and persistence of the virus the agency came up again to forecast in April "a contraction of 3.0 percent in 2020"².

In Africa precisely, the virus is causing serious economic issues as several agencies and organizations have come up with diverse predictions. The World Bank in April for example,

predicts that “GDP growth in sub-Saharan Africa could fall sharply from 2.4% in 2019 to between -2.1% to -5.1% in 2020”. Also, Brookings Institute on 18 March notes that “Africa’s GDP growth is expected to fall from 3.5% in 2019 to between 2.5% and 1.5% in 2020”³. In Germany, one Finance Minister by name Thomas Schaefer was reported to have committed suicide in March due to the economic implications of the virus on his country’s economy⁴.

Beyond the above, the virus has also claimed thousands of lives since its outbreak in late 2019. According to the World Health Organization, the virus, as at 15 March 2020, claimed a total of 3204 lives in China alone. Outside the People’s Republic of China as of the same 15th March, there are a total of 2531 deaths caused by the virus⁵. Put in a different way, the present pandemic just like its predecessors has made many children worldwide parentless and many parents childless. The pandemic has also stolen many’s husbands as well as many’s wives. In the United States, for example, a Michigan woman lost her husband-Lee Brown Jr. as well as her only son and only child-Lee Brown III to COVID-19 in a couple of 3 days⁶.

The above notwithstanding, the pandemic has posed a serious threat to the fundamental rights of humans. Without mendacity, states, as the pandemic persists, were forced to embark on the policy of lockdown, be it partial or total lockdown. The lockdown in turn placed a great limitation on human rights, which is, partly or wholly, against what is contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Objective of the Study

Like it is stated in the introductory part of the study, the present pandemic is an impediment or has constituted a barricade to the realization of human rights. Thus the major objective of this study is to reveal the effects of COVID-19 on human rights.

Statement of the Problem

COVID-19 is indeed a new pandemic that has stuck humanity. But despite its novelty scholars have written a lot about it. Some looked at it from an economic angle while others examined its socio-economic and humanitarian implications. Kalu, B. (2020) for example, examined the humanitarian implications of the virus in Nigeria. He notes that the pandemic is causing a serious issue of hunger in the country⁷.

In his article titled *Impact of COVID-19 on Global Economy Structure*, Mahar (2020) tried to investigate the impacts or effects of the pandemic on the global economy. He notes that in just one week, about 3.3 million Americans applied for unemployment while a week later “another 6.6 million people started searching for jobs”⁸.

John-Langba and John-Langba (2020) explored the impacts of the pandemic on public health/health systems, peace, and security in the African region in their article titled *COVID-19 Responses in Africa: Implications for Peace, Security, and Public Health*⁹. But despite numerous research on COVID-19, very few [if there is any] or no scholar/institution/agency

has ventured into the study of the impacts of COVID-19 on man’s fundamental rights. It is against this backdrop or to fill the vacuum that the study is carried out.

The Pandemic, COVID-19

COVID-19 is an unprecedented, deadly virus that broke out in late 2019 in Wuhan, China. To World Health Organization, COVID-19 or coronavirus(es) “are a large family of viruses that are known to cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)”¹⁰.

It is contagious for it is, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “a respiratory illness that can spread from person to person”. The major symptoms of the virus are fever, cough, and difficulty in breathing or shortness of breath¹¹.

The COVID-19 is no doubt a pandemic. The WHO notes:

*In the days and weeks ahead, we expect to see the number of cases, the number of deaths, and the number of affected countries climb even higher. We are deeply concerned, both by the alarming levels of spread and severity and by the alarming levels of inaction by world leaders in response to the outbreak. We have therefore assessed that COVID-19 can be characterized as a pandemic*¹².

As of 22 May, WHO announced that a total of two hundred and sixteen (216) countries have recorded cases of coronavirus. There is also, as at the same date, a total of 5,103,006 confirmed cases worldwide, and 333,401 confirmed deaths globally as a result of the virus¹³. As at 23 May, Johns Hopkins University, and Africa Centre for Disease Control on COVID-19 in Africa reveal that Africa has a total COVID-19 confirmed cases of 103,875 and a total number of 3,184 deaths¹⁴. Johns Hopkins University & Medicine also gave the data below:

Table 1.COVID-19 Confirmed Cases and Deaths by Country as of 23 May 2020

Country	Confirmed Cases	Total Deaths
US	1,611,691	96,479
Russia	335,882	3,388
Brazil	330,890	21,048
United Kingdom	258,504	36,757
Spain	234,824	28,628
Italy	229,327	32,735
France	182,018	28,218
Germany	179,850	8,261
Turkey	155,686	4,308
Iran	133,521	7,359
India	131,103	3,865
Peru	111,698	3,244
Canada	84,131	6,365
China	84,081	4,638

*(See Johns Hopkins University & Medicine, 2020 for full details)*¹⁵

Fundamental Human Rights

Fundamental human rights, according to the United Nations, “are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status”¹⁶. They are essential rights, freedoms, and liberties to which a person is entitled to for being a human being. They are inalienable. Fundamental human rights include all the freedoms and rights contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) some of which are:

- Right to life, liberty, and security of person (Article 3).
- Freedom from slavery/servitude (Article, 4).
- Freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment/punishment (Article 5).
- Freedom from arbitrary arrest, detention, or exile (Article 9).
- Right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state (Article 13).
- Right to leave any country, including one’s own, and to return to one’s country (Article 13).
- Right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (Article 18).
- Right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association (Article 20).
- Right to education (Article 26)
- Right to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits (Article 27)¹⁷.

Effects of COVID-19 on Fundamental Human Rights

One of the blatant effects of COVID-19 on human rights is the restriction of movement. Governments of many nations have, though as a way of curbing the spread of the contagious coronavirus, restricted mobility. Some even shut down their borders completely. Contrary to man’s right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders’ of each state and the right to leave one’s own country to another as contained in UDRH, Libyan authorities, for example, embarked on “closure of airports, points of entry (POE) along land borders and maritime boundaries as well as domestic movement restriction”¹⁸.

The Croatian government also suspended mass transport until 21 of April. It barred non-EU citizens from entering the country until at least 15th of May. In Cyprus, passenger flights were prohibited from coming into the country until further notice while the French government closed its borders with Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, Switzerland, and Spain. Germany likewise closed its borders with Austria, Switzerland, France, Luxembourg, and Denmark, and prohibited all foreigners [except European Economic Area (EEA) nationals/residents and Swiss and UK nationals] from entering into their territory¹⁹.

Education-wise, COVID-19 has caused a break in learning. On the 18th of March, the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization noted that an estimated number of 107 countries implemented national school closures due to COVID-19²⁰. This policy initiation

and implementation are of course against children's right to education. In fact in West African sub-region, students were asked to vacate schools, and the popular, crucial West African Secondary School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) [which is students' *visa* or a major credential/ requirement for entry into tertiary/higher institution in the sub-region] suspended across the Anglophone countries in the region-Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Gambia²¹.

No doubt, some countries have long looked for an alternative to traditional going to school for learning. Due to COVID-19, some countries have begun to pursue the policy of e-learning seriously to keep their students up to date. But the truth remains that no substitute [e-learning inclusive] can ever beat or be more productive and/or profitable than a child coming in physical contact with his teachers, and learning among his colleagues. Also, in Africa where most countries still wallow in erratic electricity and poor mobile network, e-learning tends not to work effectively. In short, UNESCO concludes that these nationwide school closures "are impacting almost 70% of the world's student population"²².

Religiously, COVID-19 has, in no small measure, endangered people's freedom of worship. In Rome-the seat of the Roman Catholic Church for that matter, worshippers were barred from attending mass. According to CNN, all Catholic churches across Rome, due to COVID-19, were ordered to completely close and worshippers exempt from attending Sunday mass. In respect to this, a church historian in Rome says "this is the first time that all churches in Rome have been closed to the faithful"²³. In Nigeria churches and mosques were also shut down²⁴. In Saudi Arabia, the same is the case as worshippers were disallowed from entering, according to Aljazeera (2020), "Mecca's Grand Mosque nor the Prophet's Mosque in Medinah" due to the virus²⁵.

In Syria, Cardinal Mario Zenari-the nuncio to Syria, considering the effects the virus is having on the church as well as on the religious rights of the people, lamented in an interview with Vatican News on April 4:

Despite the hostile Syrian environment and the wars in the country, Christians up to this point in Syria *celebrated Holy Week and Easter every year 'even under the risk of bombs and mortar attacks'. But the coronavirus pandemic has done what the war could not... All the churches are closed for worship*²⁶.

Concluding Remark

Strictly speaking, the unprecedented coronavirus pandemic is not only having grave effects on the economies and wellbeing of nations and their citizens; it is also having an impact on the fundamental rights of humans. It is seriously affecting humans' freedom of movement/mobility, their right to adequate, physical education, their right to migrate to countries of their choice, their right to freedom of worship, their right to freedom of peaceful assembly/

association, and so forth. In short, COVID-19, directly and indirectly, is endangering, or better still, posing a serious threat to human rights.

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