

SURVIVING A GLOBAL CRISIS: GOVERNANCE CAPACITY AND LEGITIMACY-MANAGING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN JORDAN

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ABSTRACT

Indisputably, the COVID-19 crisis has reshaped every aspect of our lives. It has dramatically changed our daily activities and our lifestyles. Governments worldwide have implemented various restrictive procedures to mitigate the impact of this crisis. However, as the epidemiological situation improved, they started to ease the restrictions, adapt to the new changes caused by the outbreak of COVID-19 and re-open sectors. This study explores how the Jordanian government survived the COVID-19 crisis. The Jordanian government managed to control the crisis rapidly by implementing early strict intervention measures followed by easing and re-opening measures. However, those easing measures have been reluctant swaying between on and off. This has created a state of confusion and frustration for the public and resulted in a lack of trust in the government's decisions. Therefore, almost two years from the start of the crisis, things do not seem as bright as then. Thus, the lesson learned from the Jordanian case is that the key to successful crisis management is the trade-off between governance capacity and governance legitimacy.

Keywords: Crisis, Capacity, Legitimacy, Covid-19

INTRODUCTION

Crises have always been an essential part of humans history. Humankind has survived multiple crises over centuries. A crisis refers to “a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization’s operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat” (Abazid, Basheti, Esraa, Al-Jomaa Abazid & Kloub, 2021). The key to surviving a crisis at an organization or country level is managing the crisis. However, managing a crisis is not an easy task; it involves operating rapidly, properly and efficiently in an ambiguous, risky and continuously changing environment (Abdellatif & Shahroury, 2021). It also involves making and executing decisions that take into account the multiple interests and expectations of those who are affected by the consequences of the crisis. To do so, various competencies and disciplines are required such as; law, supply chain management, administration, logistics, medical care, press and public relations (Abdellatif & Shahroury, 2021). They must execute political decisions and safety measures while taking into account multiple interests and citizens’ expectations, particularly by fostering commitment and trust from those they aim to serve (Christensen & Laegreid, 2020)

The year 2020 was a bizarre year for all humanity. It was called the Great Reset (Abdellatif, 2021). It is believed that the world would not be the same as before. The year 2020 has brought colossal challenges and dramatic changes to every aspect of our daily lives due to the outbreak of COVID-19 around the globe. Lifestyles have changed, daily activities have massively reduced, and gatherings were prohibited. Most of our normal and routine activities that were typically carried out in real life have been conducted virtually (Abu-Farha, Mukattash, Itani, Karout, Khojah & Alzoubi, 2021; Alqutob, Al Nsour, Tarawneh, Ajlouni, Khader & Obeidat, 2020; Al-Tammemi, Tarhini & Akour, 2021). Businesses all over the world were the mostly affected (Al-Tammemi, 2020). Governments all over the world have taken many restrictive measures to slow down and control the spread of the Coronavirus (Baldwin & Tomiura, 2020; Basheti, Nassar, Barakat, Alqudah, Abufarha & Saini, 2020) However, ubiquitous lockouts, restriction of business activities and market crashes have led to a crisis state

in many sectors and economies (Christensen & Laegreid, 2020). COVID-19 was described as a supply shock and a demand shock. Undoubtedly, it will have shocking impacts on all countries; *“historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine the world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next (Christensen, Laegreid & Rykkja, 2016).* Therefore, COVID-19 could be considered as a major driver of change and a powerful spark for innovative solutions at both the economic and social levels of societies.

During this turbulent and challenging time caused by the outbreak of COVID-19, managing the unknown and uncertain, planning for the unexpected and ambiguous, addressing critical issues and responding to the population demands and expectations are key for successful handling of the COVID-19 crisis. However, it is not an easy task for governments but rather difficult and complicated. In such circumstances which deal with societal security and crisis management, scholars emphasize the significance of tackling two key issues; first, governance capacity which relates to the readiness, coordination, regulation and implementation to provide effective crisis management. Second, governance legitimacy which relates to the population's trust in government and concerns such as; expectations, support, accountability and reputation (Coombs, 2007). To handle a crisis successfully, a challenging trade-off between governance capacity and governance legitimacy must be made. Capacity is imperative, so does legitimacy; the population must accept and follow the measures and instructions taken by the governments. COVID-19 pandemic is an example of a global crisis that threatens every aspect of our lives. Governments all over the world have put different plans and taken different procedures to handle this complicated and uncertain time (Laegreid & Rykkja, 2019). Some countries have been more successful than others in managing the COVID-19 crisis. This research explores how the Jordanian government survived the COVID-19 crisis. Compared to many countries in the region, Jordan has been successful in managing this crisis and this research looks for explanations for that. To do so, the Jordanian context will be discussed first, then issues of capacity and legitimacy are addressed and finally, the research concludes with some lessons learned.

The Jordanian Context

Jordan is a small developing country located in the Middle East region with a population of approximately 11.048 million and a total area of over 89,000 square kilometers (Lodge & Wegrich, 2014). According to the World Bank, Jordan is considered a lower-middle-income country with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of 44.50 billion dollars in 2019. Same as all other countries, Jordan has been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, being a developing country with limited resources located in a turbulent zone and surrounded by unstable borders has levied the Jordanian government with extra challenges to manage this crisis successfully.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the Jordanian government has adhered to the procedures and recommendations announced by the World Health Organization (WHO). The government has taken a series of decisions and implemented various strategies to control and limit the spread of the virus inside the country. The battle against COVID-19 in Jordan has been led by a collaborative multi-disciplinary team at the National Center for Security and Crises Management (NCSCM) (Newman, 2020). This team has been cautiously and continuously reviewing, updating and disseminating decisions and information to the population through official channels. For instance, the number of confirmed cases, deaths and recoveries are publicly announced daily *via* official reports and press conferences. Moreover, a website was launched to provide the public with sufficient information, recommendations, advice and statistics about COVID-19 and the epidemiological situation in the country. In addition, social media channels were heavily utilized to raise public health awareness and educate them about the danger and seriousness of the virus and the groups of high risk of infection. Further, religious leaders, public figures, educators and influencers were all highly involved in

communicating the message of the significant importance of social distancing and infection prevention measures (Petrov & Petrova, 2021).

Undoubtedly, Jordan has shown a promising and exemplary method in managing the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the country has witnessed many ups and downs during the last two years and experienced three waves of the virus. The outcomes and responses in each wave have varied. The following sections will briefly discuss the epidemiological situation in Jordan, describe the government actions and explain the public reactions.

The Epidemiological Situation in Jordan (2nd March 2020 to 1st December 2021)

The First Wave: The Real Crisis

The first confirmed COVID-19 case was reported on 2nd March 2020, in the capital Amman. By 17th March 2020, the number of confirmed cases was 40. A total of 381 confirmed cases and 7 deaths were reported on 12th April 2020 and the WHO classified Jordan as “*a cluster of cases*” transmission. The early stage of the pandemic in Jordan relates to the period of 2nd March 2020 to 31st August 2020. During this stage, 2034 confirmed cases and 15 deaths were reported and the epidemiological curve was almost flat with very low daily confirmed cases. Until then, the real crisis did not start. The turning point was early September 2020 where the number of confirmed cases and deaths have dramatically amplified to reach hundreds and thousands per day. Therefore, the first wave falls in the period of 1st September 2020 to 26th January 2021. This wave resulted in more 320,000 confirmed cases and 4200 deaths. However, from late November 2020, the epidemiological curve started to improve and the number of daily confirmed cases declined yet remained a large number.

The Second Wave: The True Challenge

The second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic struck Jordan in the period between 27th January 2021 and 30th May 2021. This wave raised the number of confirmed cases to 735, 811 and 9452 deaths. This wave has severely hit the Jordanian healthcare system; many variants of the virus were reported, and the mortality and morbidity rates have escalated again. As announced in 4th April 2021, the occupancy rate of isolation beds was 51%, 34% and 65% and 34% in the north, south and central regions, respectively. Further, the occupancy rate of Intensive Care Unit (ICU) beds was 73%, 45% and 77% in the north, south and central regions, respectively. Further, the occupancy rate for ventilators was 50%, 26% and 44% and 26% in the north, south and central regions respectively. At this stage, the COVID-19 vaccine was made available and the Jordanian government started the vaccination process for the population. However, the majority of the population was very hesitant about taking the vaccine, especially since it was rapidly developed and made available and therefore, the vaccine uptake rate was low.

The Third Wave: The Continuous Battle

On 21st November 2021, the Jordanian government announced that the third wave has just started. The number of confirmed cases has increased massively with approximately 2000-3000 cases daily. On 1st December 2021, the number of confirmed cases was 5047 and 25 deaths. The total number of confirmed cases since the outbreak of COVID-19 was 958990 and the total deaths was 11633. However, the acceptance rate of the COVID-19 vaccine has risen tremendously and the number of vaccinated people reached 3754055. Further, the number of confirmed cases is expected to rise and exceed the million within the upcoming days. Additionally, concerns and speculations are rising about the new variant “Omicron” entering the

country soon. Therefore, the battle against COVID-19 has not finished yet and it seems that uncertainty and ambiguity will be the title of the next stage.

The Government Actions (Governance Capacity)

The first action to control COVID-19 dates back to 17th March 2020 where the Jordanian government announced a complete lockdown and activated the Defense Law issued in 1992 whereby all public and private institutions were closed except the health sector and other vital sectors, citizens were prohibited from leaving their homes unless of extreme necessity, all educational institutions were closed, gatherings of more than 10 people were forbidden, movement between cities and governorates were prevented, all non-emergency operations and patients visits were canceled, all forms of public transportation was stopped, all malls and commercial centers were closed and finally quarantine camps were established for all passengers entering the Jordanian land border crossing. Moreover, several teams of experts in epidemiological surveillance have been working across all cities to trace contacts of the confirmed cases and perform random PCR.

On 30th April 2020, the government decided to cautiously ease the restrictions. Partial lockdown was declared where movement were prohibited from (6 PM - to 6 AM) every day and complete lockdown on Fridays and Saturdays. Non-essential sectors remained closed and all educational institutions remained closed and all educational forms were delivered completely online. On 2nd June 2020 the government announced a framework for re-opening the economy to allow businesses to resume working while avoiding a resurgence of COVID-19 that could overwhelm the already exhausted healthcare system. Further, by early September 2020 it was announced that the aviation sector will resume working and commercial flights will be opened. Until the end of 2020, the Jordanian government was swaying between imposing partial lockdown and lifting it based on the daily number of confirmed cases and deaths.

In 2021, the Jordanian government implemented new strategies for managing the COVID-19 pandemic. They announced that going back to complete lockdown is not possible even if the epidemiological situation would worsen because of the economic situation of the country which has suffered major losses in 2020. The Jordanian government announced it will inject about 630 million dollars through various programs to mitigate the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic on citizens. Moreover, the government was trying to resume to normal life while reaming cautious. Partial lockdown was imposed once the number of confirmed cases increases. Significant efforts were made to support the healthcare system by opening field hospitals for COVID-19 cases, increasing the number of ventilators and ICU units and recruiting doctors and nurses to support the healthcare system. On 1st September 2021, the governments announced that all forms of restrictions are lifted, schools and universities re-opened and all normal life activities resumed. Moreover, during this year, the government has made substantial efforts to provide COVID-19 vaccine to the population. In December 2021, it was announced that from 1st January 2022, anyone aged 18 and above would not be allowed to any institution, bank or commercial mall if not uptake two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine in an attempt to improve the overall societal immunity.

The Public Reactions (Governance Legitimacy)

The Jordanian government and the NCSCM played a key role in communicating with the public and the media through daily press conferences. There was a significant media coverage about the epidemiological situation in the country and the decisions and measures being taken along with advises and recommendations for the population. During the early stage of the crisis, the public highly trusted the government and followed all the measures and recommendations. However, three months after the start of the crisis, the government started to change its measures by imposing lockdowns and lifting them, or increasing and decreasing curfew hours and opening some sectors and closing them again. At that point, the public started

to question the epidemiological rationale behind such decisions and this has affected the public-government trusteeship. For instance, the reluctant decision of Friday-Saturday complete lockdown, then only Friday Lockdown and then ending all forms of lockdown has left the public confused and not convinced with the government decisions. This particular decision had a significant negative impact on the Jordanians trust and acceptance of the government decision because Friday has a great significance and uniqueness associated with prayer and family gatherings. As such, people seemed to lose their faith and hope and this has led to overcrowding in malls and supermarkets in weekdays and holding all social gatherings and events in weekdays.

Moreover, the frequent changes in the decisions and procedures, the closure of many activities, the on-off lockdown policy and the economic losses that ranged from cutting wages to unemployment have all led to negative consequences on the psychological well-being of the population. By mid of March 2021, things in Jordan reached a boiling point when hundreds of citizens protested in many cities against COVID-19 procedures, defied the night lockdown, called for government resignation and ending the emergency laws. The authorities have used tear gas to disperse the crowds and blocked some social media channels that allow live broadcasting. Further, this state of confusion and lack of trust had a negative impact on the vaccination rate in the country. Citizens have questioned the effectiveness of the vaccine and the emphasis on up taking it. Therefore, many people were hesitant about the vaccine and refused to take it.

CONCLUSION

The early Jordanian crisis management in response to the COVID-19 pandemic was very effective in containing and suppressing the disease and resulted in a low incidence compared to other countries in the region and has put Jordan in a better position in the battle against the disease. However, months from the beginning of the battle, things started to slip out of the government's hands. A state of confusion, frustration and lack of trust topped the scene. As citizens started to question the epidemiological rationale behind the government's decisions and protested against the COVID-19 decisions. Thus, a vital lesson learned from the Jordanian case, is about the imperative trade-off between governance capacity and governance legitimacy. In this crisis, the trade-off was between protecting the public from the virus and protecting the economy and the psychological well-being of the population. Undoubtedly, protecting citizens and sustaining healthcare services is key for surviving the crisis. However, it must be followed by measures to mitigate the negative economic and psychological impacts of the restrictive measures. The Jordanian approach placed a strong emphasis on the health side of the crisis over the economic and psychological aspects. This imbalance has resulted in protests against the COVID-19 decisions, defying the lockdown and refusal to take the vaccine.

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