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Letters on Urgent Issues

COVID-19 palaver: Ending rights violations of vulnerable groups in Africa

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ABSTRACT

This commentary amplifies the rising spate of human rights violations as laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa. It notes that while governments in the region have declared restrictions on social gathering, in a bid to upend the deadly contagion, rights violations of vulnerable groups by law enforcement officials are on the increase. It argues that the underlying rationale for such flagrant abuse of power stems from the dearth of a rights-based approach to police-public relations, indifference of political actors, and a grossly inadequate public health and social care infrastructures for undervalued and powerless groups. Policy implications are laid out while suggestions are offered to social work professionals given their longstanding commitment to national security and development.

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1. Introduction

Today, more than ever before, State political structures are premised on contractual agreements between the governing class and the governed. Social contract theorists have long spoke about commensurate relations among the ruling class and the followers in which the former, via the ballot, determines the outcome of policy-making (Amadasun and Omorogiuwa, 2020a). From idealism to pragmatism, such contractual principle- under the auspices of a democratic architecture- have now become a normative venture across political dispensations and transitions in many regions of the world, including Africa. With a history of colonialism and chequered but corrupt civilian rule, as well as tyrannical military regimes; many African countries have now successfully overcome these dark past through the enthronement of a relatively stable democratic structure in the polity. Currently, with a minimum of more than a decade² experience of democratic governance, does it portend a daunting task to anticipate a decline in human rights violations as typified by the highhandedness of law enforcement officials? Since human rights reflects an integral aspect of democratic rule, how long will it take to become embedded and institutionalized in Africa given that many African States' officials are quick to flaunt

the "entrenchment" of democracy to the rest of the world? About time when these state-sponsored platitudes were beginning to gain traction in global human rights discourses (Amadasun, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c), the COVID-19 pandemic has irrevocably shed light on the double standards, hubris, and despotic dispositions of many African leaders³. Across the region, there have been widely reported cases of violence against citizens by security forces who were deployed to enforce curfews and lockdowns (UN, 2020a; France24, 2020). Suffice to underscore that such rights violations are not a matter of an isolated case since deaths and injuries resulting directly from these excessive use of force have been reported in many African countries including Nigeria (Agence France-Presse, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020; Khalid, 2020), Zimbabwe (Ndangana, 2020), Kenya (Odhiambo, 2020), and South Africa (Siviwe, 2020; Kunene, 2020). Pointedly, reports emerging from Nigeria- Africa's largest population and economy (Amadasun, 2020d)- indicate that more than one hundred cases of rights violations, resulting in eighteen deaths, have occurred between March and April alone (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Beyond this, gender-based violence have intensified in countries where promulgation of shutdown or stay-at-home orders have been implemented (UN, 2020b; Odhiambo, 2020; Beech, 2020). In a strict sense, this should not be taken as a surprise since

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² The youngest democracy in Africa is Tunisia, and the country's path to democratic rule began in 2010, following the unrest arising from the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi (the fruits and vegetable trader) when the country's security officials had, in a show of oppression, confiscated his cart.

³ Many African government, directly and/or indirectly, supports human rights abuses on their citizens either through their actions which openly gives impetus to security operatives to lambast defenceless citizens or through their inactions or indifference which is construed as approval for continued repression by law enforcement officials. Pointedly, kicking against rights violations connote denouncing and sanctioning violators, at the minimum, in the stead of keeping mum.

prior evidence suggests that public health emergencies can exacerbate multiple forms of violence that women and girls already contend with (UNICEF, 2018). Again, if we expand on human rights to include social and economic rights which spells out States' responsibility to providing access to pivotal social/healthcare services, then children's rights are equally being denied on a frightening scale (UNICEF, 2020). This situation is warrantless and poses legitimate concerns to social policy response and social work professionals (Amadasun, 2020b, 2020e).

2. Social policy and social work response

In addition to the desirability of social justice, social policy response must address root causes that elevates the vulnerability of people to abuses. As have been noted, people who are most susceptible to abuses are those at the fringe of society (Amadasun, 2020c, 2020e; Amadasun & Omorogiuwa, 2020b). In this regard, emplacing framework for the retraining of law enforcement officials which, to be sure, should address their compliance level, and that provides feedback from and to the citizens is cardinal to preventing and stymying future occurrence of rights violations, and restoring trust among the public and security officials. On the other hand, providing accountable leadership which prioritizes investments in critical public healthcare infrastructures and social protection programmes is a policy imperative. On their part, social work professionals- given their longstanding insistence on social justice and respect for human rights (Amadasun, 2020b, 2020c, 2020f) can form alliance with African Human Rights Commission to challenge human rights abuses across the continent. This could be achieved through active involvement in policy practice and advocacy, from where they can lobby with policymakers (Amadasun, 2020e, 2020f). Also, since human rights is a universal principle embedded in the social work profession (Amadasun, 2020a, 2020b), social workers (through their national professional associations) and other key stakeholders can liaise with regional and international voluntary, statutory, and quasi-government actors to pillory and/or call to order African leaders who directly or subtly abets violators. Taken together, by (1) instilling a rights-based policing and consciousness among security operatives (under the auspices of seminars, workshops, and symposia, for instance), (2) enlightening the public of their fundamental human rights (through the mass media-social, print, and electronic), and (3) promoting investments in pivotal public health and social infrastructures, the trenchant curve of human right violations of vulnerable groups in Africa may become flattened.

3. Declaration of conflict

The author declares no competing interest for this research.

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