How Morocco Is Managing The Pandemic

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So far, at least, Africa has not been hit nearly as hard by the coronavirus pandemic as have Europe, Asia or North America. Yet at least one part of the continent, North Africa, is already showing signs of serious infection, owing in large part to its proximity to Europe, where the disease has run rampant. As of April 22nd, the five countries of the region cumulatively made up more than 40 percent of the approximately 25,000 cases that have been catalogued so far on the continent by the African Union.

Of these, the Kingdom of Morocco has been particularly hard hit. It currently ranks second only to Egypt in the number of active North African COVID-19 cases, and by itself represents more than 13 percent of all infections on the continent. Yet the Moroccan government has nonetheless managed to parlay its fight against the coronavirus into a source of national unity – and, increasingly, into one of regional prestige as well.

To its credit, the Kingdom mobilized early in its fight against the disease. By mid-March, when the first domestic cases of coronavirus began to be reported, the Moroccan government had already started taking measures to shut down businesses and institutions throughout the country. By late March, that effort had expanded into a "whole of government" approach to defeating the illness, entailing significant new capital investments in the country's healthcare sector, extensive monitoring of individuals infected with the disease, and a national commitment to allocate some 2.7% of annual GDP to the fight against the pandemic.

Significantly, the measures implemented by the Kingdom include extensive social controls, such as the suspension of private and public schooling, a national travel ban, the prohibition of large gatherings, the shuttering of cafes and restaurants, and the suspension of prayers at mosques. Ordinarily, such steps would have been deeply controversial, especially because Moroccan authorities have faced growing social discontent in recent months. Instead, they have had the opposite effect, strengthening the Moroccan government's domestic standing and legitimacy.

That much is clear from a March survey of public opinion by the Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis, an independent Rabat-based think tank, which found respondents overwhelmingly supportive of the precautionary steps that had been taken by authorities. Nearly 80 percent of the almost 2,500 participants polled "expressed their satisfaction with the measures taken by the government," the study noted.

But the Kingdom's coronavirus response is increasingly transcending national borders as well. While many world governments have responded to the pandemic by turning inward, Morocco has done the opposite, and used the coronavirus as a rallying point for greater regional cooperation – and for improved international standing.

To this end, King Mohammed VI has reached out to the leaders of Cote d'Ivoire and Senegal in what many see as the start of an independent regional initiative on health. Morocco's monarch has also staked out a claim as a global leader in coronavirus response by formally joining an international consortium of thirteen countries (including the UK and Canada) to regularly coordinate and standardize national policies. These maneuvers have begun to garner international attention; Argentina's *Total News* recently noted that the Moroccan king "is the first head of state from the continent to promote an African initiative to deal with the coronavirus pandemic."

How severe the pandemic will be in Africa remains the subject of considerable speculation. A new report by the UN Economic Commission for Africa has suggested that, in the best case scenario, the continent will experience 300,000 deaths from COVID-19 this year. In the worst case, it could see over a billion infections and 3.3 million deaths in 2020 alone.

The true impact of the disease, however, might be much more muted – as it was back in 2014, when the outbreak of Ebola, although severe, didn't match nearly the number of infections that had been predicted by health experts. Nevertheless, the continent's endemic problems – including widespread poverty, significant food insecurity, fragile political systems, and inadequate governmental resources – have the potential to make the pandemic considerably worse once it does finally arrive in Africa in earnest.

What is already clear, however, is that greater regional collaboration in the face of the disease has the potential to make a real difference. In this regard, Morocco seems to be setting the continental pace.