



Governance and the Pandemic

Questionnaire #2: Civil Society & Marginalised Groups

Iran

Anonymous academic. 7 June 2020.

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Question #1: Public Trust

Is the government response to the pandemic being met with public approval? Please specify where this assessment is taken from, i.e. YouGov Poll, newspaper headlines, etc.

The government functioned in several areas:

- (1) Diagnosis and medical care;
- (2) Prevention by giving information, providing medical equipment, and lockdown measures;
- (3) Welfare for the vulnerable.

Mostly areas 1 (diagnosis and medical care) and 2 (welfare for the vulnerable) were highlighted by the public as important areas where the government performed well. However area 2 (prevention measures), framed by the late start of the lockdown and its early end, were criticized. So too was a lack of alcohol disinfectants, protective gloves, and masks, which initially were not readily available.

On the issue of welfare measures, something that was met with significant approval was that some three million low-income families were offered a small sum of money (three installments of money from 2,000,000 to 6,000,000 Rials). Those financially affected by the lockdown could apply for a 10,000,000 Rial loan, whose interest is paid by the government.

Question #2: Accurate Statistics

Are accurate statistics on infection rates and death rates available? If so, who is producing this information? And is this information trusted by the public?

Statistical data has been produced by the National Committee on Corona (*Setade Melliye Korona*). The reports are broadcasted via the governmental radio and TV, as well as other major news agencies, mainly the government news agency IRNA. A few weeks after the first cases were announced, the official assignment of death rates to particular provinces stopped. According to one official, this was to stop travelling from more infected areas to the less infected ones, and to encourage active diagnosis rather than data cover-up.

At the start of the COVID-19 crisis, statistics were a matter of debate between different political sides. The first cases of COVID-19 were announced two days before the contentious parliamentary election, which was held with little involvement from reformist groups. The opposition party of the conservatives stated that the announcement was a strategy by Rohani's government to stop people from voting and decrease public participation in a problematic election. Others were suspicious of the entire political system, argued the announcement was delayed to not disturb the campaigns. (This makes better sense if we keep in mind the dual structure of power in contemporary Iran, where authority is divided between the Supreme leadership and the military on the one hand and Rohani's government and reformist groups on the other. Both sides have their own supporters among the public.) I do not think either side has

any substantial evidence to support their claims. It seems that the first case was reported only after the brother of an infected person, in his capacity as a doctor, insisted on a COVID-19 test. The Minister of Health Saeid Namaki also said later that he was pressured by some not to announce the news in order not to disturb the polls; but he insisted that the information should become public.

Rumors on incorrect reports and diagnosis have spread both in the social media and in conversations among the people. This entire story should be read as part of a larger narrative on how much the government is not trusted especially when it comes to casualties that may reflect its own incompetence.

Question #3: Support for the Vulnerable

In instances of a lockdown, what support is available for vulnerable persons, i.e. domestic abuse victims, less able bodied persons?

Amongst the regular text messages that came from the Ministry of Health, most of which were on hygiene, one text message recommended referring to Social Emergency (*Urjanse ejtema'ei*) were cases of domestic abuse. The department belongs to the Governmental Welfare Administration, which is responsible for providing care for the more vulnerable groups. Phone calls to the department had increased this year. People had reported child abuse, spouse abuse, and suicide attempts. There were also self-assessment forms, which helped diagnose depression and stress. As the head of the Welfare Administration (Behzisti) also mentioned, it is not easy to know whether the increase has anything to do with the lockdown, or it is because of wider public knowledge of the existence of such a care system after governmental media spread the word during the lockdown.

The Welfare Administration also provided 'hygiene packages' (composed of disinfectants, gloves, and masks, as well as short guidelines) to illegal child workers and the homeless. It also paid small financial aid to the financially poor families of people with severe disabilities.

There were debates on whether the operation of shelters for the homeless would increase the chances of infection. In any case, the shelters did run as usual. The asylums for the elderly and the disabled also worked with special care to try to prevent infections.

Question #4: Marginalised Groups

What are some of the challenges that marginalized groups, i.e. low-income households, religious/ ethnic minorities, face with regards to the pandemic?

Low-income households and those without savings faced a number of challenges. This includes workers on informal contracts, cleaners, hairdressers, street salespersons, and producers of home-made food . In Iran, the lockdown coincided with the New Year, Nowrouz, spring holiday. Many businesses, which usually flourish in the build-up to Nowrouz, were, this year, affected by COVID-19.

Another key challenge has been education and online classes. The Ministry of Education introduced a certain application for all schools, where each student had access to their own classes. However, many low-income families could not provide cell phones (or any other kind of electronic device) for their children. The sharp decline in the value of the Iranian currency in recent years, means cell phones have become expensive. The least expensive handsets cost around 10,000,000 Iranian Rials, around 60% of workers' monthly minimum wage. Without access to cellphones then, a large but unknown number of children have not been able to access online education.

Question #5: Local Activism

How are local community groups and/or political groups responding to the pandemic in terms of providing support/ relief to vulnerable persons and/or marginalized groups?

Many charities, NGOs, and individuals started campaigns to provide the vulnerable with hygiene and food, as well as electronic devices that could help with online education. Some of those charities focused only on those who were not able to earn their regular small wages during the lockdown. Some focused on spreading information and hygiene packages to the homeless or those who did not stay at home, like those who collected recyclable material from the litter. The most famous relief NGO, Imam Ali Society of Students Against Poverty, has been able to collect a substantial amount of charity, and has spread it in different areas.

Social media (especially Telegram, Instagram, and to some extent Twitter) provided a platform to collect money for these campaigns. An Instagram page belonging to one of the small

campaigns reported that they had managed to provide aid for around sixty families.

Now that many religious ceremonies are not held, people spend the money that they had put aside to give to charity for food, on providing disinfectants or financial aid for poorer families, or presents for those in the hospital. Many volunteers are now involved in hospitals, doing the daily shopping of the elderly, preparing the corpses of the dead for burial according to Islamic rituals, and making masks. Even some shrines

became spaces for people who made masks with sewing machines.

Relying on his spiritual authority for a relatively large number of Iranians, the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, also invited people to get involved in helping each other in a “sympathy maneuver” (*razmayeshe hamdeli*). Here charitable acts are promoted and supported by the government.

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