



Zambia: Editorial Comment - COVID-19 - Epidemiological Thought on Why Politics and Religion are Compromising the Fight

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Abstract

To cite this article:

Chiluba, B.C. Shula, H. Zambia: Editorial Comment - COVID-19 - Epidemiological Thought on why Politics and Religion are Compromising the Fight. *J of Prev and Rehab Med*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2020, pp. 1- 4. doi: 10.21617/jprm2020.211

One of the good tenets of epidemiology is the fact that it offers skeptical disposition. Institutionalized skepticism is important in science and policymaking. In the case of Zambia, skepticism questions why the proponents of COVID-19 guidelines and prescriptions have become the ardent violators of the guidelines they espouse. Such practices among political leaders is paralyzing, especially in contexts of information and messages from WHO at this critical juncture that call for pragmatism-especially with the peak of a pandemic curve and surging infection rate, considering that we do not have additional alternative interventions apart from adhering to non-pharmaceutical interventions such as social distancing, staying at home, wearing masks and hand hygiene. Deliberate and unnecessary political and religious gatherings inaction carries the risk of dire consequences, some of which have already led to suspected COVID-19 deaths of members of parliament and hospitalization of a sizeable number of political leaders. Despite all these the proceedings of parliament remained active as though COVID-19 is history. Such reckless political gatherings question the governance ethos of public health epidemiology instituted by the same people violating them. Religious leaders are not immune to this vice- a number of COVID-19-related deaths have passed through churches with body viewings being conducted. It should be mentioned that such behaviors have led to preventing action against COVID-19 outrunning evidence, or at least helping evidence to catch up. A myopic continued action of ignoring COVID-19 guidelines by politicians and religious leaders is a disservice to epidemiology.

To begin with, it will be imperative to mention that since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Zambia did not make any meaningful gains to address the spread of COVID-19 using what are called non pharmaceutical interventions. This is so because, Zambia did not undergo any lockdown or institute an international travel ban immediately as compared to other countries that did so and made some positive gains.

To be clear and be on the same page, the editorial comments here will endeavour to be fair only writ large; and endeavor to describe epidemiology disciplinary orthodox as a whole rather than to engage in political cytokine storms. It will be made possible to discern two distinct philosophies that the pandemic exposes of how the politics is ruining the COVID-19 fight. The political expedience together of making political scores and the failures of abiding by the guidelines by both political and religious groupings.

It should be mentioned though, that measuring the effects of public health measures should be far from trivial. Measures that became clear to Zambia from the onset of the pandemic were social distancing and hand hygiene, suffice to mention that social distancing is not an intervention: it is a mixed bag of individual behaviors, some voluntary and some involuntary. These behaviors are represented in outbreak models by simulating reduced social interactions. The models sometimes suppose that certain specific interventions, such as school or business closures, will produce particular patterns of social mixing [1].

If from what was instituted as COVID-19 measures- social distancing, hand hygiene and later on wearing masks would score any meaningful success with regard to flattening the curve, Zambia risks reversing the gains it has made in flattening the curve in COVID-19 infections if the rising numbers of political gatherings continue to be violating social distancing and COVID-19 regulations are anything to go by.

Since the COVID-19 started, politicians have continued violating the rules, with recent large gathering observed during the court sessions for the minister of health and the Activities like commissioning of the fly over bridge in Makeni area of Lusaka among many

other political activities endanger lives of ordinary people[2,3]. Such persistent violations of COVID-19 guidelines are worrying. In the last three weeks or so, there has been more widespread disregard for the rules and guidelines, with many political groupings behaving like COVID-19 is on break.

Religious leaders are also not so far behind in flouting the rules of engaging the pandemic. The government allowing churches to decide whether to open or not [5], provided certain conditions to prevent the spread of infections are put in place, was made in good faith. One cannot overlook the role of religion in giving hope to the hopeless.

While most traditional churches world-wide have embraced scientific methods of fighting the scourge [6, 7] some evangelical churches have rejected sensible public health measure adopted by most countries. Some believe COVID-19 is a curse from God, others say it is a hoax.

For some, it is business as usual, and even conducting mass for COVID-19 related deaths, and body viewing for the mourners, expose, including the church leader to the virus. This is a potential death sentence to the attendees. While most churches have resorted to having virtual masses to avoid public gatherings, others have even started conducting physical cell meetings.

In members' homes. In some cases, where some members have tested positive, the leaders have told them to seal the lid over such information. Should the loss of perceived offerings blind clergy to the perils that have engulfed the whole world?

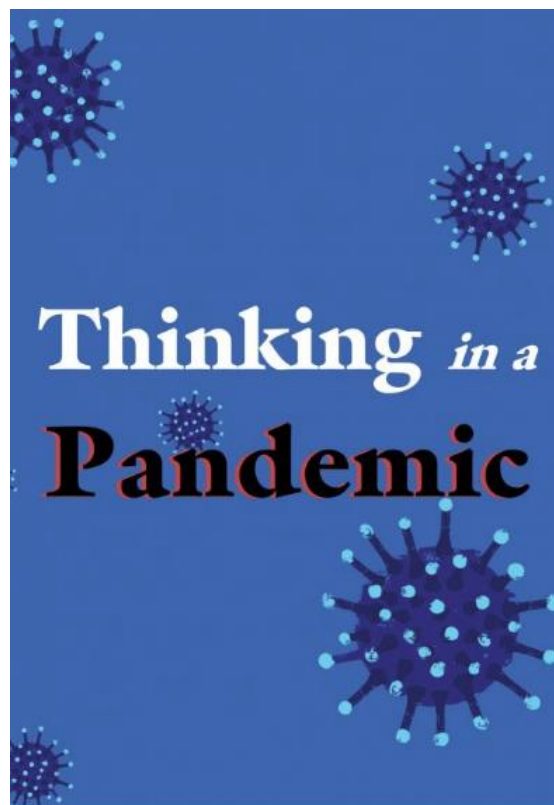
There has been a surge in number of cases with a sharp rise in the number of deaths, these rise in figures point to laxity in the guard especially by politician who are failing to lead by example, at a time when other countries are stepping up measures to contain the spread of the pandemic. To this day, WHO's emphasis has been inclined towards containment. Once detected, all cases and their contacts should be quarantined to stop further spread of the virus. Sadly, it appears that such emphasis may come to nothing if our leaders continue violating COVID-19 guidelines, putting the entire country at risk. We plausibly are now at a juncture where the virus has spread so rapidly, with many people not aware of their status, and such situations will make containment difficult to attain. We have now reached a stage as a

country and in most parts of Africa were, tracing the COVID-19 contacts has become a 'needle in a haystack' task. If our leaders continue to ignore the guidelines, the fears of a millionfold jump in new infections will continue to haunt us and flattening the curve will never be attained [1].

With the increasing numbers of our leaders testing positive and other refusing to undergo tests and with few others assembling in large groups during political gatherings, It should be mentioned that the level of complacency is beginning to show among those who are flouting lockdown regulations, exposing themselves and those around them to COVID-19.

Movements, large gatherings are being suspended in much of the world to reduce the speed of the coronavirus' spread, and we are no exception. This has not happened yet and it should not be allowed to happen as long as the nation remains vigilant and pulling in the same direction. People should continue observing lockdown rules, bearing in mind that any slip up may have tragic consequences.

The World Health Organization has already cautioned nations that the virus has the propensity to strike with another wave of infections if regulations and requirements are not followed to the letter. The million dollar question is 'are we now experiencing the second wave of infections?'



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In this editorial and epidemiological thought, the ultimate message is that we need to be thinking in a pandemic. We need political and religious leaders to be abiding by the tenets of the guidelines. In order for us to be on track confronting the many challenges of COVID-19—from the epidemiological to the economic, the social to the religious and political—demands all the moral and deliberative clarity we can muster.

In thinking in a pandemic, we've to appreciate the latest arguments from epidemiologists, public health experts, doctors and philosophers, economists, legal minds and historians, activists and citizens, as they think not just through this moment but beyond it. In the midst of uncertainty, leaders' responsibility to public reason in thinking in a pandemic should be one devoid of complacency.

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