

POLICING IN UNCERTAIN TIMES: SOME GLOBAL EXAMPLES AND LESSONS FOR PAKISTAN

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On October 18, 2019, the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security in partnership with the World Economic Forum and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation held a high-level exercise in New York to evaluate the global impact of a major pandemic. The results of the exercise, Event 201, were quite revealing as they highlighted the lack of global preparedness in the face of such a catastrophe. Experts were of the view that it would require the cooperation, support and creative problem solving by every country on the planet to resolve the issue. By sheer coincidence, the COVID-19 pandemic brought our lives to a grinding halt within a few months of the exercise. Unfortunately, just as the results of Event 201 had predicted, the world was indeed unprepared for such an eventuality and governments of even in the most developed nations are struggling to contain the spread of the virus.

As countries across the globe continue to declare national emergencies in the wake of COVID-19, law enforcement agencies are shifting priorities and resources in order to respond to the unprecedented and fluid state of affairs. Police agencies are now being tasked with implementing government imposed lockdowns, sometimes with the help of the military in countries like the United States, Canada, Italy, China and the United Kingdom. For the safety of their members, some police departments in US and Canada are only responding to essential calls for service and have limited their response to what they categorize as less serious incidents such as petty thefts and minor traffic violations etc. Such measures are expected to protect the officers from being exposed to the virus while preventing overcrowding of jails. However, there is a growing concern among the public and some law enforcement officials regarding the message being sent to the public about lack of oversight by the police and the potential rise in crime. To address public concerns, some police departments in the US are engaging in high-visibility patrols to alleviate public concerns regarding

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lack of security. Others have resorted to more creative solutions such as in Mallorca (Spain), where police have taken upon themselves the additional task of providing the much needed musical entertainment to the public during lockdown patrols.

Besides operational issues, police use of surveillance technology in dealing with the pandemic has also been a much debated topic in the past few weeks. In China, drones are being used to monitor the lockdown and to deliver live voice warnings to violators. In Chengdu city, police are using smart helmets to measure the temperature of passersby from a five-meter range, which sets off an alarm upon the detection of a fever. The use of such technology is drawing criticism from western countries over concerns regarding constant monitoring of citizens which is intrusive and a violation of privacy. Yet despite the criticism, China has received praise by the World Health Organization for its effective measures in containing the spread of the virus, which may prompt other countries to follow suit. Western nations are already reminding their citizens to brace themselves for extraordinary measures during uncertain times and under the current rapidly changing scenario, the possible use of controversial surveillance technologies like Clearview AI remains to be seen. Clearview AI matches uploaded pictures of individuals with a database of pictures extracted from social media without consent and could be utilized to identify a person who has been in contact with an infected individual.

For Pakistan the pandemic is a further addition to the woes of our poverty stricken, terror-ravaged nation. For our police in particular, which is already stretched thin in terms of resources, dealing with COVID-19 will be an uphill battle to say the least. With an alarming number of individuals testing positive on a daily basis, the government has imposed Section 144 in various regions to prevent the unnecessary movement of citizens in an effort to control the spread of the virus. As our law enforcement personnel impose lockdowns and take action against the violators, the government must recognize that long term strategic planning is required in ensuring that the police agencies are provided with the necessary resources to perform their duty more effectively. It is imperative that our law enforcement officials be provided special training and personal protective equipment and supplies such as masks, face shields, gloves and hand sanitizers etc., to prevent the likelihood of contracting the virus. In order to deal with the issue of short-staffing, police training academies in Pakistan could accelerate their courses to provide the required reinforcements. Initiatives such as the use of an application to track the movement of individuals by Sind Police is a good example of employing home-grown technology and could be emulated by other provinces.

Being a police researcher, I hold our Pakistani law enforcement officials in high regard for their service to the nation in the meager financial and human resources available to them. The government must mobilize state machinery and divert the necessary resources to support our police in their efforts to contain the virus. In China, while police agencies imposed lockdowns, teams of epidemiologists worked round the clock to test and isolate those who required medical attention. While our resources may not permit such extensive support, we must try to work effectively with what is available. The police could be instrumental in raising public awareness regarding COVID-19 instead of using heavy handed measures like beating and humiliating those violating lockdowns. Such behavior would further erode public confidence in police at a time when the entire nation must make a concerted effort to face a grim situation which has no clear end in sight.