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Secondary impacts of COVID-19: Closing civic space in fragile contexts

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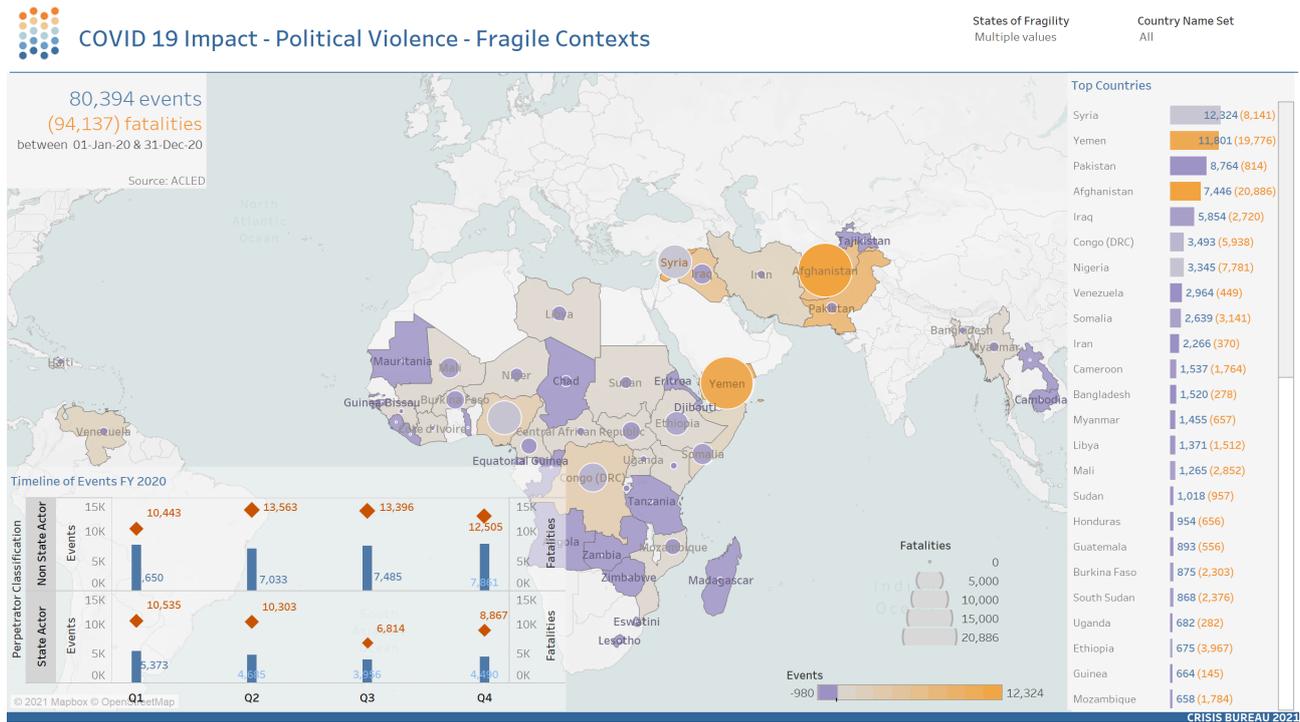
The direct impacts (loss of life) of COVID-19 have been global and well-documented. Extreme poverty has risen for the first time in two decades and the impacts on livelihoods and vulnerable or marginalized populations have been distressing and often disproportionate. Most concerning, countries with poor infrastructure, poor health and education services, and weak democratic institutions have been, arguably, the most vulnerable to both primary and secondary impacts of COVID-19. Within this framework, this brief explores the impact of COVID-19 on civic space in fragile contexts.² Information from the UNDP Crisis Bureau’s Crisis Risk Dashboard (CRD) has been used to conduct the data analysis and visualizations presented below.³

COVID-19 and Fragile States

As part of a larger global trend, fragile states have seen an increase in protests and populist movements in the year leading up to COVID-19. Conflicting opinions over lockdown measures, human rights violations in enforcement of these measures, and/or mismanagement of COVID-19 responses may have fueled these movements even further. Meanwhile, COVID-19 may have provided the opportunity for autocratic governments

to further subvert already weak democratic governance, resulting in governments becoming more autocratic. We explore these possible trends, sampling narratives on how COVID-19 impacted the civic space in fragile contexts, by examining six key cases. We conclude with an overview and a set of remarks about UNDP’s and other international development actors’ roles in building back better.

Figure 1: Map of fragile countries with data sourced from the Armed Conflict Location and Events Dataset (ACLED).⁴



“COVID-19 is exposing the fragility of our world. Despite the enormous scientific and technological advances of recent decades, a microscopic virus has brought us to our knees. But the fragility exposed by the virus is not limited to our health systems. It affects all areas of our world and our institutions.”⁵ - United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, 10 June 2020

As highlighted in the UN guidance note on civic space, an open/inclusive civic space “...reduces the risk of fragility, crisis and violence, thereby making societies safer and more resilient and policymaking more effective and legitimate.”⁶ The Secretary-General in his call for action on human rights stressed this point and highlighted shrinking civic space as a key trend to monitor in 2020.⁷ In relation to COVID-19, while international law allows for policies to curtail traditional human rights norms in times of crises, these policies must maintain certain standards (mainly, that they are proportionate and non-discriminatory).⁸

Despite the above, during the crisis 61% of all countries implemented policies that violated human rights.⁹ In the 57 fragile contexts¹⁰ where democratic governance is vulnerable and institutions often weak, 87% saw impactful violations of their democratic standards during 2020.¹¹ The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral

Assistance (International IDEA) highlighted this trend, stating that violations occurred in 90% of countries where, prior to the pandemic, the government was categorized as autocratic.¹² Overall, the closing of civic space over the course of 2020 has led human rights monitors to label COVID-19 as “...a pretext for repression.”¹³ Freedom of information was under attack in these contexts as International IDEA, Civicus, the International Center for Not-for-profit Law (ICNL) and other organizations have identified numerous cases throughout the pandemic where governments suppressed information, harassed or arrested journalists and, in some instances, orchestrated internet shutdowns.¹⁴ ¹⁵ ¹⁶ In fragile contexts, COVID-19 provided an opportunity for authoritarian leaders and political opportunists to increase their control and subvert already fragile democracies further.

The rise in state repression and intensity of pandemic-related responses deepened existing feelings of exclusion and citizen distrust. After a record setting year in 2019,¹⁷ most fragile states experienced a significant increase in protests and riots in 2020 because of COVID-19 rather than in spite of it. Relatedly, violence against civilians also increased in the majority of fragile states where data are available. This increase was driven in part by government-led violence. However, COVID-19 also enabled non-state armed groups

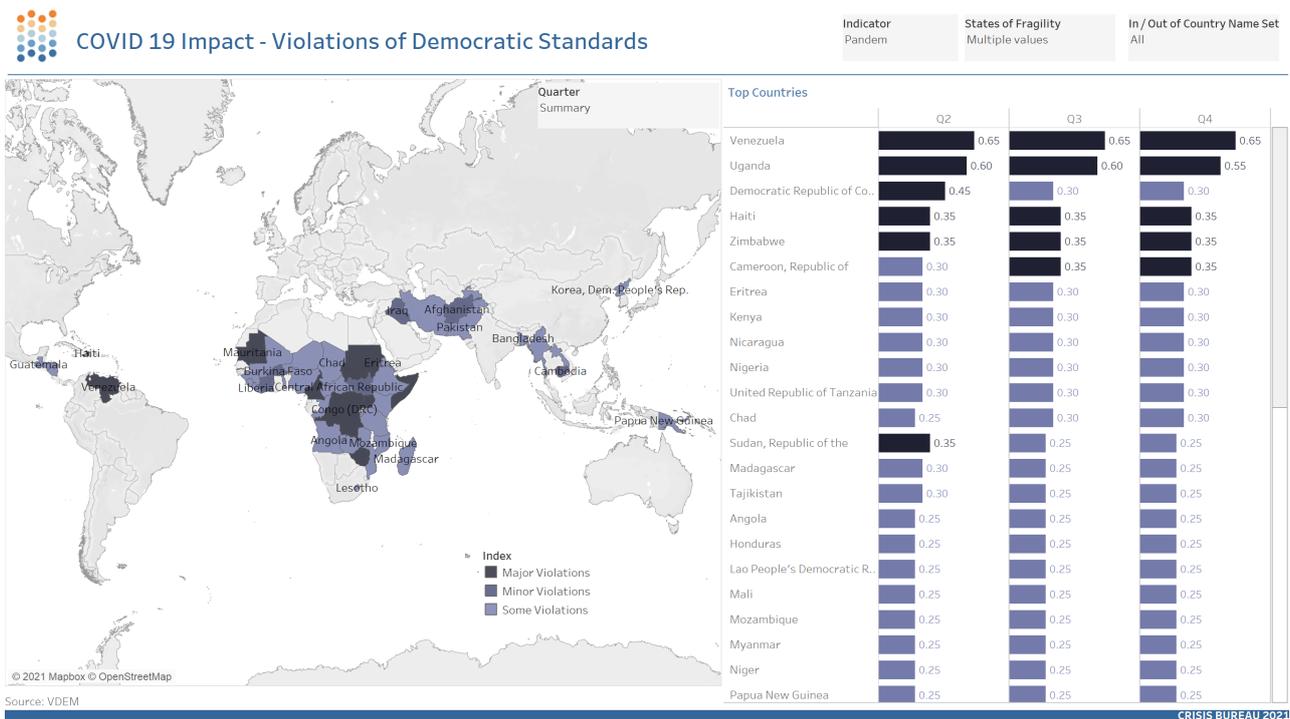
and communal militias to increase their activities in contexts where state-capacities were already stretched thin.¹⁸ The pandemic magnified existing tensions, exposed vulnerabilities and significantly undermined trust in government and social cohesion, thereby increasing fragile states' risk of conflict and instability.

To further explore how governments in specific fragile states reacted to the pandemic, we explore six cases, four in Africa (Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Uganda) and one each in Latin

America (Venezuela) and in the Asia/Pacific region (Myanmar). Beyond the global pandemic, all six states faced substantial political, developmental and security challenges in 2020.

We support this analysis with data from the Armed Conflict Location and Events Dataset (ACLED) and rely on their coding scheme to quantify riots, protests and violence against civilians. We also utilize data from the Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-DEM) to quantify the degree to which democratic standards were violated in COVID-19 responses.¹⁹

Figure 2: The Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem).²⁰

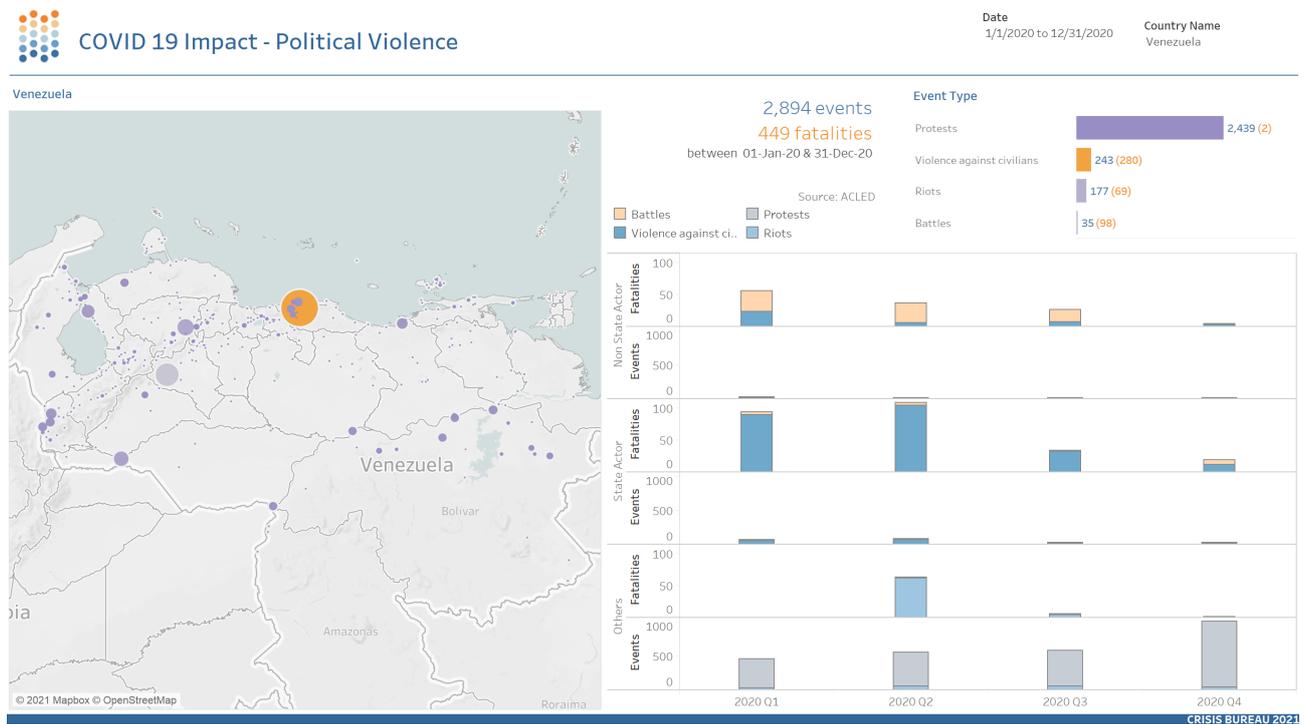


Venezuela

Prior to the pandemic, Venezuela experienced significant service delivery protests, often phrased as anti-government protests, as well as a trend of democratic backsliding, including circumvention of the national parliament and arrests of opposition members.²¹ The first COVID-19 case in Venezuela was recorded on March 13, 2020 and was immediately followed by restrictions, including a state of emergency resulting in a decline of protests. According to the PanDem index,²² Venezuelans experienced major violations in the form of derogation of non-derogable rights,²³ abusive enforcement and restrictions of media freedom, some violations of the limitations of the legislature as well as some dissemination of disinformation from official sources. In the report of the independent international fact-finding mission to Venezuela that was submitted to the Human Rights Council, it was pointed out that journalists,

healthcare workers, human rights lawyers and political opponents critiquing the government and its COVID-19 response were arrested and, in some cases, made to suffer extreme physical harm.²⁴ Additional human rights violations identified by ICNL include the extended detention of migrant workers and the targeting of ordinary citizens who question the country's COVID-19 case statistics.²⁵ The initial COVID-19 state of emergency was, furthermore, unconstitutionally extended five times and, according to Human Rights Watch, used as pretext for detaining and prosecuting opposition.²⁶ Amidst the shrinking civic space and the approaching parliamentary election, protests grew, peaking in the Q4 2020, and coinciding with a boycott by opposition candidates. The election resulted in a landslide victory for ruling President, Nicolás Maduro and his party allies.

Figure 3: Timeline of ACLED data on violence in Venezuela

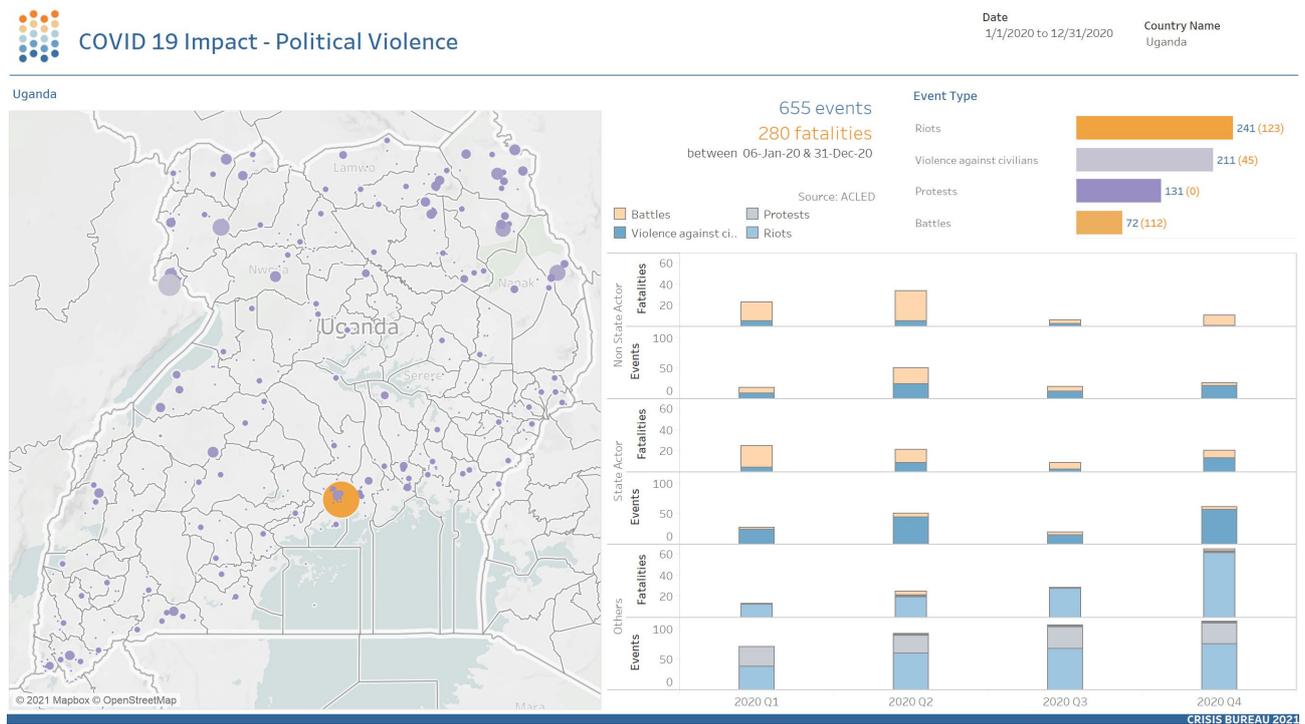


Uganda

Uganda first introduced COVID-19 restrictions in March 2020. Throughout their lockdown, Uganda was accused by numerous civil society and human rights monitors of ‘weaponising’ COVID-19 for repression.²⁷ Several journalists were reported as being physically assaulted by law enforcement officers while covering news stories on the pandemic or on opposition candidates.²⁸ The police also targeted LGBTQ+ groups, including a raid on a LGBTQ+ shelter that resulted in 23 people being beaten up and arrested.²⁹ Several UN human rights experts suggested in response that the Ugandan state was using the pandemic response to target LGBTQ+ groups.³⁰ Uganda went ahead with parliamentary and presidential elections on 14 January 2021, and arrested key opposition candidates for breaking COVID-19 restrictions during the campaigning period.³¹ Overall, their lockdown enforcement was severe and included reports

of beating up and even shooting of citizens who violated lockdown measures.³² This can be seen in the data as well, where the number of ACLED events nearly doubled during COVID-19 compared to the period immediately prior to it. A significant portion of these incidents were COVID-19-related riots, which law enforcement officers tried to restrict. Violence against civilians also sharply increased in Q4 2020 and Q1 2021; most of these incidents were related to the elections held in January.³³ V-Dem’s PanDem index shows Uganda’s COVID-19 polices included major democratic violations through the implementation of discriminatory measures, abusive enforcement of COVID-19 measures and restrictions of media freedoms, as well as the implementation of emergency measures without time limits. The Presidential election in Uganda resulted in a victory for the incumbent, President Yoweri Museveni.

Figure 4: Timeline of ACLED data on violence in Uganda.

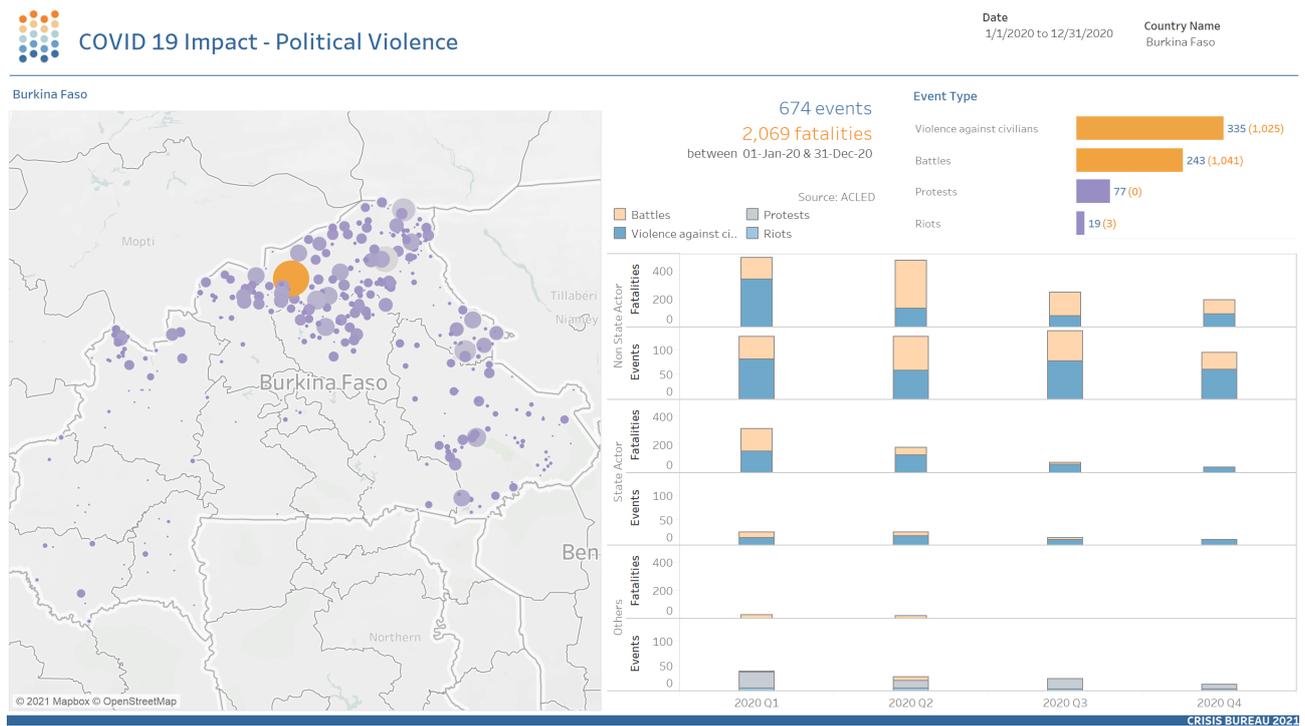


Burkina Faso

Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, Burkina Faso had relatively few demonstrations and riots, and the overarching national concern was the increased activity of armed groups. Demonstrations increased just as the first cases of COVID-19 arrived in the country but were mainly linked to unrelated government grievances. V-DEM's PanDem index only shows two minor violations of democratic standards: (i) with regard to abusive enforcement of COVID restrictions, and (ii) lack of time limits on specific restrictions. Burkina Faso saw a rise in conflict events committed by non-state armed groups, peaking in May of 2020.³⁴ The increased frequency of these attacks and the expansion of territories under the armed groups' control has led to a rapid deterioration of the security situation, including the proliferation of armed groups and

a large displacement crisis.^{35 36} One explanation for the increase in conflict incidents is that the armed groups exploited national security forces' focus on preventing the spread of the pandemic. The combination of COVID-19-related risks and the security situation severely disrupted Burkina Faso's electoral process. While the presidential election polling was held on time, voter registration was on hold for two months and much of the country's displaced population was at risk of being unable to vote.^{37 38} Burkina Faso held elections in late November of 2020 with incumbent President Roch Kabore winning the majority of the votes.³⁹ The current security situation and the on-going displacement crisis remain the primary concerns today.

Figure 5: Timeline of ACLED data on violence in Burkina Faso.

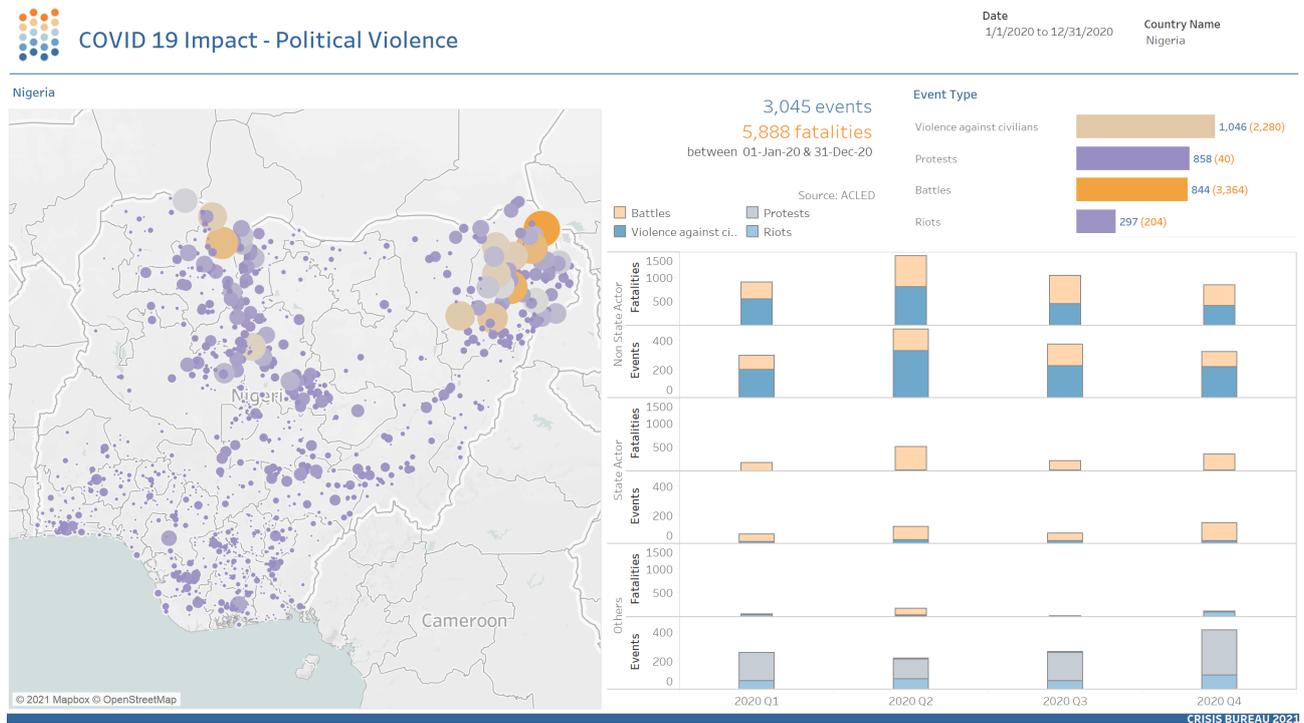


Nigeria

Nigeria announced its first outbreak of COVID-19 in late February 2020, making it the first case in sub-Saharan Africa. According to V-Dem, Nigeria experienced major violations of democratic standards with respect to enforcement of restrictions and restrictions of media freedom. According to Nigeria’s human rights commission, 18 people died at the hands of law enforcement during the first two weeks of curfew.⁴⁰ ACLED data shows that heavy-handed enforcement of COVID-19 restrictions peaked in Q2 and then slowly declined through the remainder of the year. While violence against civilians carried out by government declined after Q2, demonstrations climbed

throughout 2020. Demonstrations were mainly held in relation to the movement called #EndSARS.⁴¹ The movement began in the 2010s, in response to police brutality and corruption. It was re-invented and re-introduced in response to the resurgence of violence carried out against civilians by law enforcement officers during the pandemic.⁴² As in the case of Burkina Faso, non-state armed groups also exploited the space made available by law enforcement’s preoccupation with COVID-19. This is evident in the significant increase of battle incidents and violence against civilians not involving state forces in Q2 of 2020.

Figure 6: Timeline of ACLED data on violence in Nigeria.

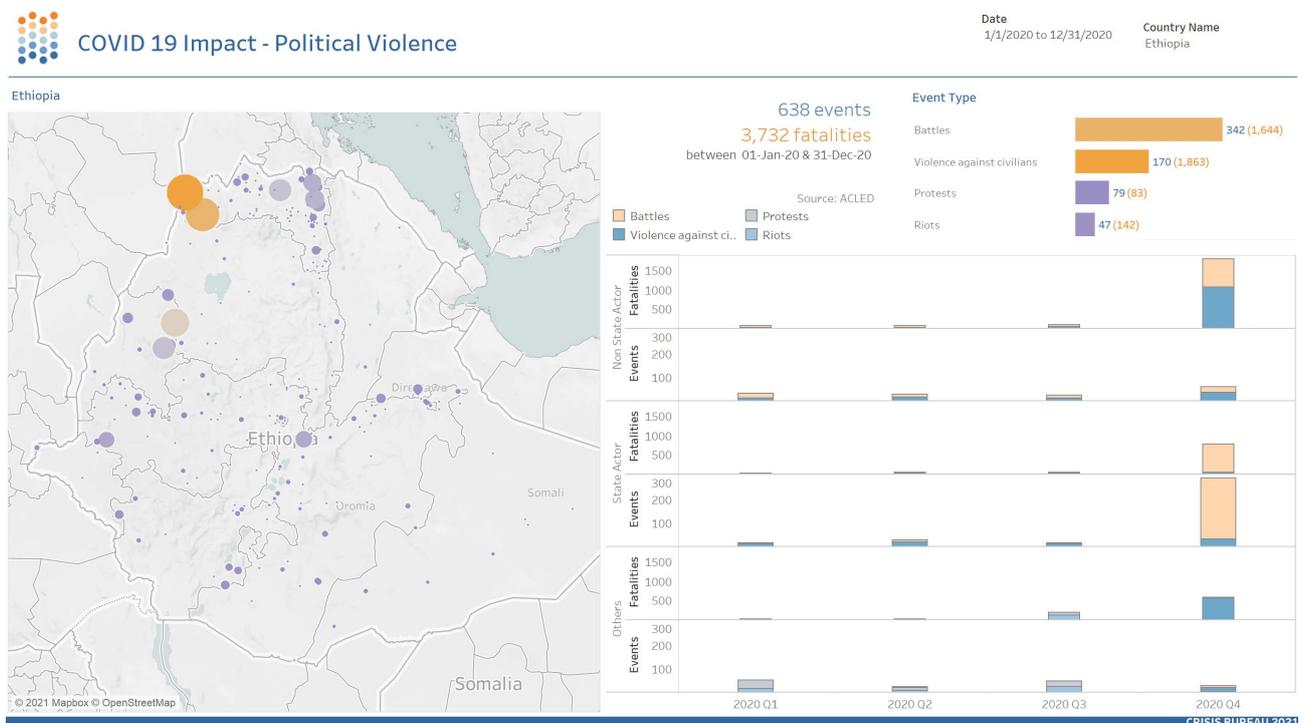


Ethiopia

Prior to the pandemic, Ethiopia experienced significant levels of protests and riots directed at the democratization initiated by the new government led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. Protests escalated on numerous occasions, and were especially linked to imprisonment of opposition candidates and the death of a prominent cultural figure.⁴³ Various ongoing localized conflicts and internal boundary disputes, especially in the south and west of the country, caused high levels of internal displacement.⁴⁴ While COVID-19 restrictions did cause a decrease in riots and protests, battles and violence against civilians increased in the first two quarters of 2020. Protests and riots peaked later in the year in relation to arrests of opposition figures and statehood demands from lower administrative entities.⁴⁵ Ethiopia also experienced violations of democratic standards in relation to restrictions of media freedom and limitations on the legislature.⁴⁶ A law passed on disinformation in February 2020 was used to prosecute individuals accused of spreading misinformation of COVID-19. This included one high-profile journalist, who commented on the

government’s response to COVID-19.⁴⁷ Otherwise, Ethiopia’s response to COVID-19 mirrored other countries in the region, and included restrictions on travel and public gatherings with associated fines for the violation of these policies.⁴⁸ Politically, 2020 was a pivotal year, as it was the first time parliamentary elections were scheduled to occur since the inauguration of reformist Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. The election was, however, postponed owing to measures introduced to curb the pandemic.⁴⁹ The postponement was deemed to be unconstitutional by several opposition groups and political parties, including the former ruling party, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), who are still in control of the regional government in Tigray. Consequently, the Tigrayan regional government organized a regional election, which took place without the recognition of the federal government.⁵⁰ The election was a significant escalation point in the political conflict between the federal government and the TPLF. Eventually, the tensions resulted in the ongoing conflict in Tigray, which is reflected in the available datasets by a high increase of battles in the Q4 of 2020.

Figure 7: Timeline of ACLED data on violence in Ethiopia

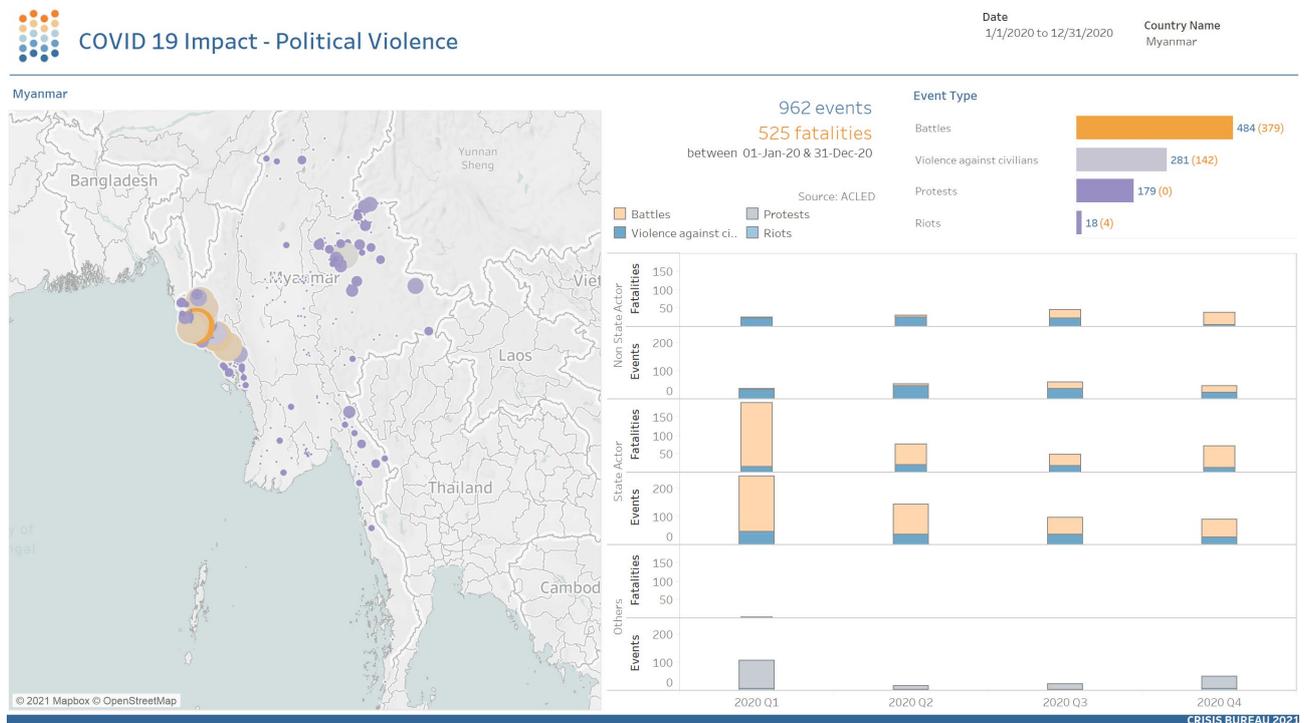


Myanmar

According to V-Dem, Myanmar experienced major violations of media freedom and minor violations related to abusive enforcement and discriminatory measures from March to December 2020. Prior to COVID-19, Myanmar experienced significant armed conflict between government forces and armed groups located in and around the Rakhine State, southern Chin State and Shan State. A unilateral ceasefire to focus military personnel and equipment on curbing the spread of the pandemic was announced by the government in May but did not include the Rakhine and southern Chin states. Fighting in the two states continued and inhibited a COVID-19 prevention response, including access to COVID-19 information as mobile internet was shut down the year before.⁵¹ The government of Myanmar cited COVID-19 as a reason to extend censorship polices nationwide for two weeks in March of 2020. Throughout the year, numerous activists, journalists and civilians were accused of, and arrested on, a variety of charges. These charges included violations of quarantine, spreading misinformation and 'defamation of

government.'^{52 53} As a ceasefire in relation to the November election was implemented across the country, battles declined sharply. Some townships and villages were excluded from voting, citing security concerns. Observers of the process have pointed out arbitrary implementation of the exclusion intended to benefit the ruling party.⁵⁴ Using the pretext of reacting to election fraud, the military led a coup in February 2021, resulting in a high increase of protests which, in turn, triggered a harsh government response. According to the International Crisis Group, the military has applied harsh counterinsurgency measures previously used to quell armed groups to curtail the demonstrators.⁵⁵ Following February's military coup, the COVID-19 response fell apart, with non-state actors subsequently facilitating the prevention and vaccination process.⁵⁶ Since then, civic space has shrunk even further, and civil society has now been rendered extremely vulnerable, with the military implementing severe financial restrictions and internet shutdowns.⁵⁷

Figure 8: Timeline of ACLED data on violence in Myanmar.



Conclusion

Each example described above, faced a unique set of political, developmental and security challenges prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. The coexistence of multiple challenges and vulnerabilities demand that we consider these contexts through a multidimensional lens, as highlighted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as well as the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) soon-to-be released Crisis and Fragility Framework.⁵⁸ COVID-19 has caused an impact across multiple dimensions of fragility. Not only did the pandemic create new fragilities but it also amplified existing tensions and vulnerabilities, underscoring that already-fragile contexts are also the most vulnerable.

In Nigeria and Burkina Faso, armed groups opportunistically escalated their activities during the pandemic's initial phase, while state attention and resources were focused on a response to the crisis — a finding that matches studies on other fragile states.⁵⁹ Exemplified above by Venezuela, Uganda, Nigeria, and Myanmar, 31 of 54 fragile states for which data is available experienced an increase in violence against civilians during the pandemic. Except in the case of Nigeria, COVID-19 restrictions interacted with ongoing political processes as well as with elections, and was used as a pretext

to disrupt oppositions' electoral campaigns, suspend key elements in the electoral process or to postpone elections altogether, thus further curtailing civic space. While not tied to a federal political process, Nigeria experienced a resurgence of police brutality in the name of COVID-19 and the revival of a popular protest movement aimed at ending the brutality.

Unlike the other examples, Ethiopia decided to postpone their much-anticipated parliamentary election. With tensions already high between the former ruling party, the TPFL and the federal government, the postponement acted as a catalyst for tensions leading to larger-scale conflict. In both Venezuela and Uganda, COVID-19 was instrumentalized to further undermine an already delicate civic space.

Given these trends and their respective impacts on social cohesion and trust, it would appear that COVID-19 served as an instrument to fuel autocracy and human rights violations as well as to deepen pre-existing grievances across fragile contexts. That 2020 followed a record-breaking year of protests globally suggests potential risk of increased conflict and instability as movement restrictions are removed.

Going forward

As highlighted in this paper, COVID-19 exacerbated pre-existing fragilities leading to a significant rise in human rights violations, autocracy and a closing of civic space in fragile contexts. Moving forward, UNDP should prioritize the promotion of democratic governance and social cohesion in its programming, with a focus on countering restrictions introduced due to COVID-19. A significant portion of impact assessments of COVID-19 have focused

on the economic factors and, while it is essential that UNDP assists governments in fragile settings and elsewhere to recover economically and regain hard-won progress on Sustainable Development Goals, it is also imperative that UNDP encourages and monitors the removal of restrictive measures, including support to civil society, by (re-)widening civic space to further sustainable human development.

Endnotes

- 1 Ethan Harrison, IMO UNV UNDP Sri Lanka Country Office, Klaus Kristensen, Early Warning Analyst, Crisis and Fragility Policy and Engagement Team
- 2 'Civic space' in this UN Policy Brief is defined as "...the environment that enables people and groups — or 'civic space actors' — to participate meaningfully in the political, economic, social and cultural life of their societies." See 'UN Guidance Note: Protection and Promotion of Civic Space,' September 2020. https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/CivicSpace/UN_Guidance_Note.pdf
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- 21 See V-Dem data; *Venezuela: Freedom in the World 2021 Country Report*. Freedom House. (n.d.). <https://freedomhouse.org/country/venezuela/freedom-world/2021>.
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