

CORONAVIRUS, CONSPIRACY THEORIES, AND PREVENTIVE MEASURES IMPLEMENTED IN PAKISTAN AND BEYOND: THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS DOGMA

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Abstract

The year 2020 came up with lethal Coronavirus (also known as COVID-19) in Chinese city of Wuhan. However, the spread of Coronavirus didn't confine itself to China rather within a very short time span it engulfed almost whole world marking its presence in almost 220 countries. There is hardly any country in the world without a patient of Coronavirus but countries such as USA, Italy, United Kingdom, Spain, France, India, Iran were badly affected as the number of patients are in a very high figures. Almost all countries despite the best medical facilities and all possible measures have nearly failed to save its people from falling prey to its attacks. Pakistan was probably on safer side earlier on but due to the negligence, religious mindset, violation of standard operating procedures (SOPs) and above all strong faith in conspiracy theories people didn't take the existence as a reality. Such aforementioned factors have now resulted in an ever-imagined increase of Coronavirus patients. Since February 26, 2020 until now (October 26, 2020) more than 43 million patients and loss of almost 1.15 million deaths have been reported. The situation keeping in view declining economy, insufficient health facilities and pills, below standard hospitals is worst and is expected to get alarming by the end of the current year. Therefore, serious steps need to be taken to control Coronavirus's spread and to save humans from a calamity.

Keywords: Coronavirus, Religious Mindset, Violation of Standard Operating Procedures, Health Emergency, Deaths, Spread.

Introduction:

A pandemic, where brings destruction and uncertainty, also hauls transformations and uncertainty; so, as the COVID-19 did. enclosed in its nature, the uniqueness of the Coronavirus and its unknown origin, scientists have failed to accumulate the exact reasons and ways of its spread. As predicted so far, the prevention is the only solution until cure is discovered. After the Wuhan outbreak, the first very few findings included the contagious nature of the Coronavirus. It was discovered and announced that the quickest medium of its spread is the human body and it spreads majorly through human to human interaction but later on the cases were also reported from human to animal spread.¹

This discovery was the most helpful in the prevention of spread of the Coronavirus so far and all other safety measures which have been taken sprang out of this. It was basically the steps taken for the prevention of the spread which brought the world to a new era. The government officials of all affected 220 countries of the world to build strategies to prevent human-to-human interaction in order to defeat the contagion. Almost all countries agreed

upon (sooner or later) that the immediate, complete and restricted closure of institutions is the only key to prevent human-to-human interaction. This was applied by the states per their interior state of bearing the lockdown. In some country, the initially opted for the smart lockdown keeping in view the tracking of the active case and locked down only those regions, cities, and town quarters where Coronavirus was surfaced.

The spread of Coronavirus made it difficult to escape from it. As per the October 26, 2020 more than 43 million people have been infected and about 1.15 million are died because of it worldwide. There were about 32 million people who recovered worldwide.ⁱⁱ In the case of Pakistan, 328,602 cases were registered as confirmed infected patients of COVID-19 and 6,739 patients have been died because of COVID-19 on the 26th day of October 2020.ⁱⁱⁱ

In response to this, federal, state and local governments ramped up to shut down nonessential businesses, all educational institutes, recreational activities, public gatherings; up to what extent they could afford the consequences. It is noteworthy that overall loss was borne by the nation states which also predicted another recession. Human Societies have always been confronted with health challenges. Considering those challenges, the governments took measures and succeeded curbing few of those however some of the health challenges couldn't be controlled due to the false ideologies, greatly based on conspiracy theories and non-serious attitude to common men.

Similarly, the world is currently witnessing a serious challenge in the form of COVID-19. Despite the mobilization of all the available technologies and efforts, the said Coronavirus has not only caused deaths but has also dented almost all the bigger and smaller economies of the globe. Consequently, the pandemic continuous to spread devastation across the globe. The study tends to investigate the measures taken to control the spread of pandemic. Mainly, the study is based on evaluating the role of conspiracy theories as to what extend such theories have damaged the measures for reduction and control pandemic?

Objectives of Study:

1. Assessing the preventive measures taken to control COVID-19.
2. To weigh the relationship between conspiracy theories and spread of COVID-19.
3. To gauge the influence of religious mind set on preventive measures.

Review of Literature:

The coronavirus is not a new phenomenon as it has its various strains which remained known since last many decades as early as 1960.^{iv} The coronavirus commonly causes up to 15% of common colds in humans each year, mainly of these happened to be in the mild forms. Previously two variants of coronavirus have caused severe illnesses: severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2002, with severe acute respiratory distress, resulting in 9.6% mortality; and Middle East respiratory syndrome in 2012^v, with a higher mortality rate of 34.4%.^{vi} The recent wave of coronavirus is more dangerous as compared to the previous as it has badly affected the world population with large number of deaths and has posed economic crunch as well. On the other side there are many people, across the world, who still do not believe in the existence of the coronavirus.^{vii} Many of such people blame opponent religions behind it's spread to cause a damage to them.

Spiritual Shock

Along with the compromise of GDPs and educational breakdown, the people of this

21st century, have encountered a ‘spiritual shock’ when they were forced to quit religious activities. Almost all predominant religions of the world encourage and direct congregation one way or the other. Followers shook down when the states restricted the practices. The religious practices were halted because of the covid-19 spread as it was more devastating when people gather even during the religious commemorations. The restrictions imposed by the states were taken as violation of the basic human rights since people never expect it in the way it happened to them. In many countries, this resulted in violations of standard operating procedures and even upsurge which was caused by the anxious followers. To mention here, this also gave rise to religious conspiracy theories which will be discussed later in this article.

United Nations’ Stance and Human Rights

Religious freedom has its place in Universal Declaration of Human Rights since 1948. Unlike other rights, it cannot be derogated in times of public emergency. This means that even in the time of health emergencies this fundamental right must be balanced in order to combat the impact of the Coronavirus. While freedom of religion is not concrete, which is why it cannot be restricted in the same way for everyone. Believers and non-believers both have their rights to express.

Likewise, different religions have different ways to practice. So, in case of a polarized society, public health emergencies should address all religions according to their respective religious beliefs and the respect for the religious commandments should also be considered by the authorities. As stressed by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet, ‘*human dignity and rights need to be front and [center]*’ in the effort to contain and combat the spread of COVID-19. The UN experts have also stressed that the restrictions must be based on public health concerns and should not target particular minorities groups or individuals. Moreover, they said that the strategies should not be used ‘*simply to quash dissent*’.

Methodology:

The current study is based on the secondary data analysis. For the said purpose, international, regional and national data sets about the prevalence of COVID-19 were used for a comprehensive analysis. In addition to that the recent research studies, scientific reports, newspapers’ articles and reviewed articles were also consulted for a comparative analysis of the COVID-19 spread and the role of religion and conspiracy theories centering around it. The majority of secondary data sets were taken as most recent and in some cases, newspapers’ articles and scientific reports published in 2020 were also used keeping in view of the focus and scope of the current research article.

Results and Discussion: Measures for Prevention, A Global Perspective

The recent wave of pandemic has effected each and every part of the world while posing threats to many people’s lives. It has also tested the medical facilities being raised throughout ages. Since the remedies are being made to overcome the spread but it is still a long way to go. The pandemic has literally impacted every aspect of human life since the social, cultural, economic, political, and religious aspects have greatly been influenced. It has impacted the life of people representing each and every strata including the people living below poverty lines and those who have huge piles of resources. The businesses are also effected as many of the big companies of the world have lost their capital since it has halted all businesses.

Previewing the magnitude of the pandemic, the countries across the world have imposed some restrictions on movement of people and for the running of the businesses. In many countries the standard operating procedures (SOPs) were followed by the people since these were made to protect them. But there were some people who were not showing full compliance to the SOPs. The people had constructed their own rationale for not following the SOPs. In some cases, the SOPs were meant to be followed as those who were showing reluctance had fallen prey of the coronavirus. In the proceeding section a debate has been presented about the compliance of SOPs across selected countries.

United States of America

The USA has witnessed the highest number of affectees of the coronavirus. In the united states, the pandemic has challenged religious communities as social distancing measures complicate religious gatherings. In the US, the decision of limiting social gatherings has been allocated to the respective states.^{viii} According to Pew Research Center data, 10 states restricted all forms of face-to-face religious meetings; however, most states granted some exemptions to the pandemic rules. many religious leaders annulled in-person services or shifted to virtual platforms, but others continued the services in insolvency of official orders.

As per the first amendment, religion and state matters are to be kept segregated; Some faith communities have sued in federal court, they believe their right to free exercise of religion is being challenged. James W. Carr and Gayle Manchin briefed that the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) secures freedom of religion according to the Article 18. At the same time, it allows governments to restrict religious freedom legally where protection of a legitimate state interest is required. Considering the significance of freedom of religion or belief, it does not allow major restrictions. They could only limit the manifestation of this freedom.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia had been preparing for the Coronavirus well beforehand but the first case was reported on March 2, 2020.^{ix} Saudi Arabia, considered as the holy place for Muslims around the world and welcomes the believers from all around the globe. It is worth mentioning here, that, the peak months of Muslim believers' visit are the first six months, the holy month of Ramadan and the last month, *Dhul-Hijjah*, of lunar calendar. On February 26, 2020 state banned visitors from traveling to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina fearing it would intensify the spread of the Coronavirus. On March 5, 2020 it restricted entry and temporarily closed the grand Mosque in Mecca for disinfecting. As in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia also contends that Coronavirus was brought into by the travelers from Iran because it outbreaked with 11 cases in the province of Qatif which is a predominantly a Shi'a Muslim majority province.

United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has reported about 125,123 case of COVID-19 and has officially restricted religious gatherings.^x The General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments in Sharjah ordered the churches to suspend children from all church activities. It also banned religious sermons and lectures but allowed individual prayers. The UAE also restricted Friday prayers in mosques to 15 minutes and limited weekday prayers even more. The governmental *Shari'a Ifta unci* issued a *fatwa* prohibiting the infected people from attending prayers. The Ministry of Health and Prevention also postponed classes at Qur'an

learning centers for sanitize.^{xi}

South Korea

A lucid example of South Korea how violation of religious restrictions has led to the spread of the Coronavirus. The Shincheonji church in South Korea has a reputation for secrecy; some members do not reveal their religious affiliation to family or friends as a precautionary measure because they face hostility. There are more than 300,000 church followers worldwide in more than 20 countries, including in Wuhan. A 61-year-old female church member developed symptoms (before being diagnosed) but attended church services in the city of Daegu. According to the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC), she was responsible for spreading the Coronavirus to an approximately two-thirds of the more than 7,500 cases. This led to a surge of infections amongst Shincheonji members.^{xii}

Iran

Iran comes among the world's top countries in terms of COVID-19 infected cases. The spread of COVID-19 in Iran is somehow associated with the travel of business personnel to and from Wuhan city of China. But the way the government in Iran has taken it becomes the public health concern. The visits to the pious leaders' shrines in Iran remained unchecked for general public of Iran and the visitors from across the globe. There are approximately 568,896 reported case of Coronavirus in Iran with 32,616 deaths until October 26, 2020.^{xiii} Pakistan being neighbor to Iran was at risk of COVID-19 spread as many of the Shi'a devotees were already on the vitiations when the COVID-19 was reported first in China and then in Iran. The one possible inflow of COVID-19 in Pakistan was made by these devotees coming back from Iran.

The Case of Pakistan

Like the entire world, Pakistan is also included among the affected countries. According to latest reports Pakistan is among top 25 countries where number for Coronavirus patients has reached to 328,602.^{xiv} Though the number of reported patients may seem normal when compared with countries like USA, Brazil, France, Italy, India and China, the rise in number of cases is not less than a shock especially after Feb 26, 2020. Having reported the first case of COVID-19 on Feb, 26, 2020, Government of Pakistan under the supervision of Pakistan disaster management Authority (PDMA), established a "Quarantine center" in the border area of "Taftaan". So that the spread of Coronavirus could be curtailed and other citizens of the country could be protected. Considering the situation, the government of Pakistan while adopting a policy of "Smart/partial lockdown", announced an initial lockdown from March 15, 2020 till April 5, 2020.^{xv}

Under this policy government decided closure of all the borders (India, Iran and Afghanistan), the educational institutes, Mosques and other religious places like shrines, play grounds, shopping malls, parks, marriage halls, industries except grocery shops and medical stores by declaring a medical emergency across the country especially on airports, railway stations and bus stands. Some other measures of prevention included public awareness through print electronic media and messages containing precautionary were also disseminated through texts and caller tunes. However, due to the increased number of patients reported from a group of preachers in the area of capital city Islamabad and other parts of the country, government decided to extend the lockdown till June 2020.^{xvi}

Policy of partial lockdown, public awareness campaigns and precautionary measures did work in limiting the number of patients, but the spread of the Coronavirus couldn't be stopped as the government didn't limit the movement of people within and from other parts of the world. Consequently, the Coronavirus is spreading faster in Pakistan.^{xvii} As the number of patients and deaths are mounting on regular basis despite the rise in death toll, people of Pakistan are neither believing in existence of Coronavirus nor ready to behave sensibly. The only thing they believe, and trust are the conspiracy theories which are one of the major reasons for shocking rise in pandemic patients in Pakistan.^{xviii}

However, the public attitude generally depends upon the messages being conveyed by the people, they consider are reliable and trustworthy or have emotional attachment with. Similarly, the already existing factor of non-seriousness was fueled after the statement of Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, who attempted to console people, declared Coronavirus a sort of "flu." Furthermore, he also said that Coronavirus will not affect people of Pakistan as their immunity was much higher than western people. The statement influenced the masses the other way around as people were found with more non-serious attitude.^{xix} Furthermore, the statement was misperceived by the masses and the misconception, lack of awareness led to the increased non-seriousness as people hardly followed SOPs and kept on attending public gatherings which ultimately caused rise in COVID-19 patients across the country.

Another conspiracy theory which also played its part in rise of pandemic was sort of religious one as one of the leading religious scholars of the country "Maulana Tariq Jameel" claimed that Coronavirus is a sign of Godly wrath. Since, Maulana is also an inspiration of millions of people around the world. People out of their limited knowledge and blind faith, started considering it as sign of God's anger. People instead of taking precautionary measures or adopting medication started going to mosques and shrines in large numbers. Such situation also played its part in an increase of COVID-19 cases.^{xx}

Another misconception that miss-led the people was, actually the belief that Coronavirus is actually the part of US-Israel secret policy to destabilize China and other growing economies of the world.^{xxi} Moreover, the spread of Coronavirus is also considered as part of 'Zionist' plan to control the world by mass murdering people, especially Muslims with the help of Coronavirus so that the world population and economy could be controlled and they could deprive the people not only of their health but also bread and butter. It is generally thought in Pakistan as a conspiracy against Muslims so that the "Zionist lobby" could prepare ground for what they say for "*Dajjal*" and his arrival as according Jews mythology "*Dajjal*" is considered to be the "Masaya" of the Jews whereas Muslims consider him a "Deman".^{xxii}

Moreover, the spread of Coronavirus is also linked with 5-G technology, which has recently been introduced in the world so that the wireless communication, high data speed, low latency and increase quality of service. The general perception regarding 5-G is said to be a deliberate spread of Coronavirus and curing them with a vaccine containing micro-ship. The chip would help in linking human brain with 5-G towers. With the help of 5-G technology human could be monitored and controlled. In short due to control on human, human would be converted into a "Human Robot" and ultimately used for self-interests. Based on this misconception in UK, many 5-G towers were set on fire however, there is no scientific proof, and the technology is suggested to negatively affect health on certain social media channels.^{xxiii}

Moreover, certain fallacies, regarding Coronavirus were also spread through, videos, short messages and articles on social media. The videos mostly portrayed people, pretending to be doctors and paramedics and claiming a complete absence of Coronavirus and declaring it to be a conspiracy or propaganda to declare more patients of Coronavirus and receive dollars from Bill Gates foundation as this foundation and its owner Bill Gates is being blamed to be the main perpetrators behind the spread of Coronavirus.^{xxiv} Since, Bill Gates is promoting his pharmaceutical business from economic point of view while from Islamic point of view Bill Gates among the top 13 richest people who are strong followers of “*Dajjal*” and consider him their leaders. Overall, it is being declared as conspiracy against international economy and Muslims.^{xxv}

Critical Analysis:

Based on the afore-discussed conspiracy theories and other social media misconceptions, many people are still being found in a sort of confused frame of mind and falling prey to the attacks of Coronavirus. Since, religious mind-set and “inculcated Habitus” greatly prevail in Pakistan, it has led the masses towards violation of SOPs, carelessness, religious practices, local/self-treatments and above all irresponsible frame of mind. Moreover, aforementioned attitude was apparent from the outbreak of the COVID-19. To add further, the lack of awareness, reliance on local/self-medication, negligence of government, above all non-seriousness and social imitation have resulted in an increase of 500% Coronavirus cases during June 2020.^{xxvi}

During the eve of Eid-ul-Fiter (an annual religious festivity), government, keeping in view the religious enthusiasm, increased public demand/pressure, decline in economic growth, comparatively limited number of patients and deaths, decided to change its policy and ease the lockdown with some precautionary measures and SOPs so that people could shop and prepare themselves for Eid but this measure of government resulted in a disaster. Soon after Eid the number of patients and deaths from Coronavirus increased, which compelled the government to tighten the lockdown once again. Despite that the number of patients have reached 328,602 infected cases with almost 67,39 deaths.^{xxvii} Despite, government’s policy of smart lockdown, increased capacity of testing, formulation of laws and awareness campaigns, the spread of Coronavirus seems to be out of control. The result of such misconceptions can be gauged through reported 328,602 Coronavirus cases in Pakistan.

Conclusion:

The mounting numbers of Coronavirus cases and death toll in Pakistan are getting more dangerous and alarming not only for Pakistan but also for other parts of the world. Considering, the worst conditions of health sector, shortage of paramedics, limited number of ventilators, shortage and price hike of life saving pills, limited testing capability, declining economic growth, and success of falls propaganda demand serious and strict policy implementations by government the people of Pakistan or else this may culminate into a great human and financial loss. Moreover, if the number of cases kept mounting, it will also endanger people, suffering with disease like Cancer, Diabetes, Hepatitis and TB because Pakistan’s health system and economic conditions doesn’t have the capability to accommodate and treat all such patients along with Coronavirus patients.

Almost 50% population of Pakistan denies the existence of Coronavirus and consider it something fake, revealed by Gallop Survey of Pakistan in its recent survey.^{xxviii} Considering, the survey and existing threat of Coronavirus spread, government need to

declare health emergency and take measures to stop the spread of fallacies on social media as its spread has created a lot of confusion among people or else the negligence may turn into an irreparable calamity not only for Pakistan and but also rest of the world.

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