

Research article

COVID-19 and Global Leadership Crisis in Israel: A Case Study

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Abstract.


The COVID-19 pandemic is a global public health crisis that has caused major setbacks for all countries around the world. The pandemic has not only raised concerns about the socioeconomic situations of citizens but has also managed to expose the global leadership crisis. The response to the crisis from world leaders has remained deplorably absent. This article highlights the successes and challenges faced by Israeli leaders in responding to the emerging crisis as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in the year 2020. The article also demonstrates how leadership has a monumental impact on how a crisis is managed.

Keywords: Israel, COVID-19, leadership, crisis

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1. Introduction

The world was put on alarming situation when coronavirus, or notably known as Covid-19, emerged in December 2019. Several months later, World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 as pandemic in March 2020. Since then, the human life drastically changed overnight. Governments ordered a stay-at-home mandate for citizens to curb the spread of the deadly virus. Daily normal activities such as learning at schools and universities as well as working shifted from face-to-face to virtual. Restaurants and public spaces such as malls and parks were forced to be closed. The world was practically put under quarantine for several months.

The coronavirus or Covid-19 pandemic put the world on existential crisis. Not only that it placed humanity on vulnerable risk, the pandemic also exposed global leadership crisis. The immense scale of the pandemic as well as its critical risks and impacts are unpredictable and extremely challenging for nation leaders to respond. The result is overwhelmingly grave. The pandemic raises predominant uncertainty both to governments and their citizens. Global leadership is constantly being questioned regarding

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their responses to the pandemic and how it can maintain the livelihood of the people during the pandemic.

According to IGI Global, global crisis can be defined as events such as war, economic decline, pandemic, extreme natural events that affect all countries in economic, social, cultural, political, and many other issues. Global crisis may cause devastating social, economic, and financial impacts on individuals, society, and the economies [1]. The Covid-19 pandemic, in particular, is considered worse than the latest global financial crisis in 2008 due to its impact on the well-being and health of individuals, lockdowns and entrance restrictions in several countries, and the decline of economies.

The pandemic has shown incompetence of political leaders and their failure to address the issue in the first instance. The first blunder made by leaders at the beginning of the pandemic was denying the severity of the virus and underestimating its threatening consequences. The incompetence of leaders to respond to the crisis has driven many countries into lockdowns and catastrophe. Not only that the pandemic cripples the economy, it also took millions of lives worldwide. Medical experts such as epidemiologists, virologists, and public health scholars have presented studies and research to counter the spread of the disease [2]. However, the reluctance and denial from the authorities to respond had only created the situation worse.

Different countries handled the pandemic situation differently. It all depended on the initial response from the political leaders in each country. For example, former president of the US Donald Trump responded to the situation by ignoring science and underestimating the threats. The slow response from Trump administration resulted in the US overtaking China as the country with the most reported cases in spring 2020 [3]. However, several other countries, such as Australia, handled the initial situation of the pandemic more effectively. In March 2020, Australia had taken efforts in fighting the pandemic by closing its borders to all non-Australians citizens and mandated massive testing and contact tracing [4]. Australia is known to be one of a few countries that is successful in addressing the issue and curbing the spread of coronavirus.

One country in Asia that has been considered successful in addressing the issue is Israel. The first case of Covid-19 in Israel was reported on February 21, 2020. An Israeli citizen was tested positive for Covid-19 after returning to Israel from her two-week voyage on the Diamond Princess cruise ship in Japan. This marked the first case of Covid-19 in the Jewish state. The woman and other people who were also aboard were immediately taken to Sheba Medical Center for 14-day isolation. The patient was put under constant observation by Israeli medical personnel to provide information on the virus and prevent the infection from occurring in Israel [5].

A day later, Israel's former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu mandated 14-day home isolation rule for Israeli citizen who visited East Asia, particularly Japan and South Korea. This action was taken after 200 Israeli students were put under quarantine after being exposed to a group of South Korea tourists [6]. Israel was among many countries that took effective and immediate precautions to curb the spread of the virus at the beginning. The response aforementioned actually received heavy criticism from China and South Korea as it appeared to be "radical" and considered to be baseless and exaggerated as Covid-19 situation wasn't even declared as a 'pandemic' until March 11, 2020 [7]. The initial swift response from Benjamin Netanyahu in addressing coronavirus was applauded by the citizens and political leaders and considered to be quite successful.

Israel implemented its first lockdown on March 9, 2020 when Netanyahu ordered mandatory quarantine for all people, including Israeli citizens and foreign arrivals, for two full weeks before entering the country. Israel was among the earliest nations in the world to enter national lockdown even before the World Health Organization announced Covid-19 crisis as a global pandemic [8]. However, the country's situation worsened as positive cases of Covid-19 spiked to over 100 by March 12, 2020. PM Netanyahu subsequently announced shutdown of public spaces such as restaurants and malls. Schools and universities were closed and switched to distant learning. The government also required employees from non-essential businesses to work from home. Citizens' movement was restricted significantly [9]. Israel's quick response in the early stages of the pandemic by implementing strict restrictions and protocols led the country to be triumphant in overcoming the first wave of the virus.

Although Israel's recovery efforts in tackling the first signs of the pandemic had been considered as effective, it wasn't without its own challenges. It is apparent that the Covid-19 pandemic has been a tremendous challenge for political leaders around the world as it is the ultimate test for their capability in leadership in managing crisis on an unparalleled and unprecedented scale. This is no different for Israel. In the early stages of the pandemic, Israel was in the middle of national election. Moreover, the sitting prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's term of office was deemed controversial, especially during his campaign at that time. Netanyahu was under three criminal indictments: bribery, fraud, and breach of trust [10]. While the government managed to provide quick and immediate response during the first wave of the crisis, it still failed to conceal the deeper political crisis in the country.

PM Benjamin Netanyahu inclined to extreme pandemic recovery efforts and precautions to ensure that Israel's health system could endure the devastating concerns

regarding patients' needs and strengthen medical workers during the pandemic. The efforts to contain the spread of Covid-19 in Israel was under the command of Ministry of Health at the ministerial level. Therefore, total lockdown of the country was considered necessary as a strategy given that the healthcare system was weak at the time. The option to shut down the entire country was also in line with Netanyahu's approach in alerting the public that the situation was critical and it needed aggressive control [11].

Netanyahu's ways in managing and communicating the crisis was called as a centralist approach. In his attempts to educate and inform the public, Netanyahu divided his target audience into two: the general public and Netanyahu's political rivals. For the first target, Netanyahu and officials from the Ministry of Health created strategies in order to convince the public about the severity of the crisis and guided them to conform to strict health protocols. This attempt included closing public spaces such as schools and workplaces. For the second target, Netanyahu's aim was to convince his political rivals to cooperate in tackling Covid-19 crisis. This was intended to ensure that Netanyahu could continue his term of office as the prime minister of Israel if the government were to be united. As mentioned before, during the time the pandemic hit, Netanyahu was under three criminal indictments and trials. Netanyahu adopted three strategies as a national emergency narrative to address both political and health concerns for the two target audiences: a) strategies of intimidation; b) public relations strategies to impose his image as a competent leader to both the general public and his political rivals; and c) creating a connection between health and political concerns by embedding calls for a unity government in his press conferences regarding the Covid-19 pandemic [12].

The coronavirus pandemic demanded thorough attention from leaders of each country to prevent further collateral damage. Prime Minister Netanyahu had made himself indispensable to the process of recovery in Israel albeit being under three criminal indictments at the beginning of the pandemic. Netanyahu's strategies were considered successful particularly regarding the formation of a coalition government with his political opposition in May 2021. Netanyahu had proven himself to be an excellent crisis manager by being directly involved in educating the public about information surrounding the pandemic and health protocols. While securing his position as the incumbent Prime Minister of Israel, over time Netanyahu paid less and less attention to the fight against coronavirus and shifted his interests towards economic restoration [13].

However, confirmed cases of Covid-19 escalated since the Israeli government was not establishing any clear strategies for testing and tracking despite Netanyahu's pledge to reach 30,000 tests per day. This led Israel into its second lockdown on September 25th, 2020 which made the country as the first country in the world to impose a complete

lockdown for the second time. This was due to the premature reopening of public spaces and restoring various business sectors. The government also rejected recommendations from health experts regarding the reopening of schools and universities which contributed to a significant outbreak of Covid-19 cases among the premises. The reasons how Israel went from being one of the most successful countries in tackling the pandemic to the worst were based off three things: a) the undisciplined citizens who refused to follow health protocols to contain the virus; b) most of the Ultra-Orthodox communities refused to limit their religious traditions during the holiday; and c) rejection and denial from the government to take immediate actions in fighting the virus [14]. Following the second lockdown, Israeli public showed a decline of trust toward Netanyahu's handling of coronavirus pandemic as evidenced by a survey by Israel Democracy Institute. Only 27 percent of Israelis showed trust in Netanyahu [15].

By December 2020, Israel had recorded 350,000 cases of Covid-19 and almost 3,000 people have died. When vaccines are finished being developed, the main concern shifted to the deployment of vaccines to citizens [16]. To secure vaccination doses for its citizens, Netanyahu established a deal with Pfizer Inc. In an interview with *Financial Times*, Pfizer Head Albert Bourla revealed that Netanyahu persisted to accommodate Pfizer with statistical data for research in exchange for vaccines coverage for the entire country. Pfizer finally settled with Israel being picked as vaccination study for the company as the country has a relatively small area and excellent health records of the residents. After securing the agreement with Pfizer, PM Netanyahu started Israel's vaccination campaign in December 2020 [17].

However, gaining public trust regarding vaccination was a little tricky at the beginning since many citizens were feeling hesitant and refused to take vaccination doses. PM Netanyahu then became the first Israeli to receive the vaccine in order to overcome the significant barrier. His inoculation was broadcast live on television as a kickstart Israel's ambitious vaccination campaign. PM Netanyahu's vaccination made him one of the first political leaders in the world to receive coronavirus vaccine. Netanyahu stated that setting an example and good role model was crucial to create an ethical narrative surrounding vaccines [18]. Netanyahu's persistence and proven leadership led Israel to become the highest-ranked country in terms of vaccination rates with an influx of up to 500,000 vaccines weekly. The result shows that Netanyahu's vaccination efforts were considered successful and can set an example to other countries on how to provide recovery efforts post-pandemic [19].

2. Conclusions

Overall, the Covid-19 pandemic situation in Israel was arguably handled in effective manner initially. This is due to the immediate response from its political leader, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in curbing the spread of the virus before the situation escalate. From imposing lockdowns and ambitious vaccine rollout, Israel is one of a few countries that debatably has implemented fruitful and impressive recovery efforts. However, Israel can also be an example of what can happen when restrictions are loosen too early.

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