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Editorial: Trust, participation and pandemic politics in Africa

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Editorial on the Research Topic
Trust, participation and pandemic politics in Africa

Several types of shocks have recently transformed trust relationships in Africa. The Coronavirus pandemic impacted "horizontal" relationships by straining social networks that people rely on during times of uncertainty. It also inspired new "vertical" demands on governments, as citizens wanted to know when they could get vaccinated, whether the vaccines were safe, and how long intrusive social distancing polices would be necessary. Importantly (and not unlike parts of the West), people often did not believe health experts and government officials with answers to these questions. Such skepticism spanned across institutions. According to the most recent Afrobarometer survey, for example, respondents are more likely to trust traditional rulers than opposition political parties or police. Those same surveys suggest that Africans' mistrust of the police is grounded in everyday experiences of weak governance: high levels of corruption among the security forces corresponds with violence (Gillanders et al., 2024; Page, 2018). This second shock transforming trust is surely rooted in the post-colonial legacies of Africa's weak states, but it also represents the limited and incomplete progress toward democratization since the 1990s as well. Underperforming governments have stoked frustration with democracy itself, inspiring distortions of popular rule through populist narratives. Thus, the third disruption to Africa's and Africans' bonds of trust arose from the startling return of coups, with military takeovers in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Guinea Conakry, and Gabon. One might add Sudan as a variation on this problem, where well-deserved mistrust in al-Bashir's long reign fueled a popular movement for accountability—but infighting swiftly descended into civil war and one of the world's biggest humanitarian crises.

The essays in this collection touch on each of these three shocks in different ways, bringing together rising scholars and familiar voices in African political science. In "*Public Trust and State Management of COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria*" Abayomi from the Nigerian Institute of Legislative Studies examines the bi-directional linkage between public trust and the management of the pandemic. Drawing on interviews and focus groups, he identifies a "vicious cycle" between government mismanagement and low trust. Several factors compounded the challenge, including inadequate food and medical supplies, the diversion or mis/appropriation of those "palliatives," and in too many cases, a heavy-handed government approach to enforcement of public health measures. This mistrust contributed to weak citizen compliance with public health policies to mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic, while the crackdowns complicated the already fragile state of government legitimacy. He recommends regular rather than episodic citizen engagement

with the relevant government agencies, the institutionalization of transparency, and civic efforts to promote belonging.

Two papers focus on civil society dynamics during the pandemic. In "Trust and Mistrust in COVID-19 Politics," Guiatin from Université Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso explores the political role of civil society in Burkina Faso. His essay departs from a puzzle: in recent years civil society has acted as a counterforce against state excesses. Yet civil society failed to mobilize in response to serious failures by President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré's government during the pandemic. Guiatin's interviews attribute the inaction to a low awareness of the threat posed by COVID-19 among civil society leaders in the early months of the pandemic.

In presenting this evidence from elite interviews, he engages a classic debate in the research on African civil society. The critical role of protest movements during the Third Wave of democratization in the early 1990s (Bratton and Van de Walle, 1997) led donors and governments to assume that civil society served as a counter-force to state power. This view also aligned with a shift among international financial institutions such as the World Bank, who in a new embrace of "good governance" saw non-state power as conveniently compatible with ambitions to promote the private sector, continuing a legacy of structural adjustment (Roelofs, 2023). However, this perspective may have simplified the class-based nature of many demands originating from economic exclusion (Branch and Zachariah, 2015). It also obscured the multifaceted nature of civil society in Africa, where organizations sometimes embraced an apolitical standing as a way to promote cooperation for local development (Kew, 2016; Ndegwa, 1996). Other times these organizations straddled the fence of the imagined boundaries between state and society, due to either links to historic cultural organizations shaping political party development or co-optation by governments (LeVan, 2011). These debates were born anew with the rise and swift demise of the Arab Spring, where social movement scholars have highlighted organizational independence as a critical prerequisite for organizational capacity and institution building necessary for lasting democratization (Kadivar, 2022). Guiatin thus engages classic debates about civil society, updating them for the current era of democratic backsliding, where civil society alternatively faces populist co-optation and authoritarian demobilization.

Gumbi from Bayero University and Baba from Usman danFodiyo University also consider civil society dynamics. Their collaboration examines how low trust impacted policy choice in Nigeria during the pandemic. Importantly, they trace the origins of the "End SARS" protests—some of the biggest since Nigeria's transition to democracy in 1999—to a backlash against lockdowns and other containment measures to protect public health (SARS is the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, known for its brutality). After people became outraged by theft of relief assistance and other government mismanagement, the police overreacted, translating into an even bigger mass movement with broader demands for human rights and accountable governance. The article's qualitative approach uses interviews and newspaper reports to test institutional performance theory, which posits that observable performance of government shapes citizens' confidence in public institutions.

Finally, a article co-authored by Murumba from Daniel Moi University and Pashayan from American University differs from those above by studying the impact of the pandemic on trust at a micro-level, zeroing in on daily life in a Nairobi slum. When Kenya adopted containment measures to stem Coronavirus in 2020, it deployed the Provincial Administration, a relic of colonial control. Wage laborers from the Industrial Area and informal workers from settlements such as Mukuru Kayaba soon protested the adverse economic impact of public health measures. The state met these demands with force. Ultimately, both the regulations and the institutions chosen to implement policy undermined the urban poor's trust in government, linking lived experiences of subaltern uncertainty with the volatility of Kenya's local and national politics.

All of the articles share a commitment to understanding the political and social impact of the pandemic. For example, COVID-19 intersected with a wave of protest embracing demands for better governance, "cleaner" elections, and more vertical accountability. The coups highlight the volatility of low trust contexts, while social movements in Nigeria and Kenya demonstrate how pandemic-related grievances intersected with other popular demands. The fruit of this robust north-south collaboration is a truly global perspective that brings new perspectives to the transformation of trust across a swiftly changing continent.

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