

## Corona Pandemic in Pakistan: A Success Story !

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Since declaration as pandemic by WHO on 12.3.20, COVID 19 devastation has jolted the world mentally, psychosocially and economically.<sup>1</sup> As of recent updates, it has affected 213 countries with 22,646,894 cases and 792,358 deaths reported worldwide.<sup>2</sup> Almost twenty percent of World population was put under lockdown, sealing borders, closing institutions and markets.<sup>3</sup> Despite all efforts and interventions in place, we have seen collapse of health systems, death toll and mass graves in European countries.

Pakistan was no exception with first case reported on February 26,2020 in Karachi and confirmed cases to date are 292,174 with 6231 deaths.<sup>4</sup> Pakistan, house of 230 million people with 24.6% living below poverty line, with meagre resources and a weak healthcare system.<sup>5</sup> The country was liable to face millions of deaths and breakdown in terms of economy. The Government of Pakistan took drastic measures of imposing lockdown, banning air travel, national disaster management authority(NDMA) issuing guidelines and setting up corona quarantine centers.<sup>6</sup> It was impossible for anyone to curb this menace with poor resources in a developing country like ours. The imperial college, London study estimated 13.6 million infections and 80,000 deaths in Pakistan by August 04, 2020.<sup>7</sup>

Post Eid, at end of May, it appeared to be heading towards a catastrophe as, if not more, big in magnitude as some European countries. The danger increased to alarming level, when the hospitals in major cities became overwhelmed with serious patients. Intensive care units in the largest hospitals filled up, and families were frantically going from one hospital to another in the search for a bed. There was panic all around, private hospitals had to be called in as the fledgling health system seemed to collapse in the ensuing days.

But just a few weeks later in July, hospital admissions

appeared to fall drastically. The fall was so sharp that it astounded everyone. Initially it was thought that the conspiracy loving nation has stopped coming to the hospitals with a fear of death. But the decrease has been sustained. With around 6,300 coronavirus deaths till first week of September, Pakistan appears to have fared far better than most Western countries. The Pakistani government was quick to congratulate itself as did United Nations and Wall street journal described Pakistan as a coronavirus 'bright spot'.<sup>8</sup> WHO has included Pakistan amongst seven countries from whom international community should learn how to deal with pandemic.

The sudden decline in patients has puzzled every one and is no less than a miracle. There are theories which may never be proven.

Can the data from Pakistan be trusted? Are the figures manipulated? There are certainly many more coronavirus cases than the roughly 298,000 officially recorded, as the testing has been relatively low, due to economic constraints, but the recorded drop in infections is substantiated by the fact that the proportion of tests that come back as positive has also been decreasing, as have the hospital admissions and number of deaths.

So maybe Pakistan is far away from Europe with different environment and genetics and may be infected by a different and weaker strain. Various theories of hot weather, immunity, BCG vaccinations and early response to pandemic have been postulated.<sup>9</sup> The cities in neighboring India which share the same attributes and seem to have been worse affected, refute these theories. One major difference may be that Pakistan has less densely populated slums as compared to India with majority population residing in open village areas where virus never penetrated.

One obvious difference is the age of Pakistani population which is like a pyramid, majority being a young population with an average age being 22 years and only 4% population being above 65 years, both in sharp contrast to the demographics of European

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population. But it's less clear why the situation hasn't been more similar to that across the border in India, with similar population. The holy month of Ramadan with fasting, prayers and taking more care of personal hygiene might have a role to play.

An interesting, but unethical, theory is the use of corticosteroids by the local GP and the quacks for trivial flu like illness, the first tier care provider for the majority of the population. The theory seems plausible as multiple studies across the world is advocating earlier use of hydrocortisone and dexamethasone.<sup>10</sup>

Pakistan government efforts of smart lockdown, extensive media campaign, establishing helpline for public, central dashboards for COVID reporting, coordinated and coherent strategy, formation of National command and operation centre (NCOC), contact tracing and care using polio workers definitely need applause. The cash assistance with “Ehsas” program which disburse Rs145 billion emergency cash to daily wagers along with charity by public during Ramadan and lockdown, prevented migration of people from urban to rural areas curbing massive spread of disease.

Still, none of the theories could be substantiated and really there is no scientific explanation, we must thank Almighty for His grand miracle. Should Pakistan sustain its progress in the next couple of months, it will be a major turnaround, and feat for government. The important concern for the time being is that we need to exercise caution and government has to endorse it. The practice of face masks, social distancing and hand washing have to be

considered new norms. In the wake of opening schools, we keep our fingers crossed.

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