

Mapping oppressive measures carried out in the name of COVID-19

Interview with Sahar Vardi (Israel)



Photo: Riot police preparing to contain people who were detained for violating El Salvador's nationwide lockdown measures in San Salvador, El Salvador [Jose Cabezas/Reuters]

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues on a global level, many governments around the world are initiating a number of control measures to minimize the impact and contain the spread of the virus. While public health should be a priority for everyone, there is an increasing amount of extreme measures that are sounding alarm bells. Governments and corporations have historically used crises as opportunities to introduce new policies that would otherwise be impossible to pass, normalizing them in a new status quo – and many are taking advantage of COVID-19 for their own oppressive agendas now.

*In this month's "Voices from the South," we speak to Karibu partner **Sahar Vardi (Israel)** about the work that is being done to document emergency measures, legislations, and other restrictive measures that are being conducted under the banner of COVID-19 around the globe.*

The project's eventual goal is to create a database and a map of these restrictions before they become the new normal.

Karibu: How did the idea come up to map out repressive measures that are being taken around world under the banner of the fight against COVID-19?



Sahar: The idea first started with my work here in East Jerusalem. Looking around at what was happening in the city in the last few months when the pandemic hit, we saw the Israeli police raiding neighborhoods under the banner of fighting COVID-19. There has been increased surveillance and phone tapping, and politicians have even refused to leave positions of power in order to not create instability during COVID-19. Yet we didn't have the ability to protest, document and resist this.

The more I read about other places in the world, and spoke to colleagues around the world, it was so clear that this is happening to various degrees everywhere. With the rise

of far right, nationalist governments over the past few years, we were already seeing more measures to systematically target voices of dissent and political opposition. And governments and corporations have historically used crises as opportunities to introduce new policies that would otherwise be impossible to pass, normalizing them in a new status quo—what author Naomi Klein calls the “shock doctrine.” We were already experiencing the rapid shrinking of space globally for civil society organizations, including human rights groups, activists, and academics. The global pandemic may have given a new boost to the effort to restrict civil space.

So we started this mapping project to document emergency measures, legislations, and other restrictive measures that are being conducted under the banner of COVID-19 around the globe. We wanted to map these measures in countries with ongoing gross Human Rights violations, but also the countries that pride themselves in being places that generally respect human rights. Changes to how we understand democracy during this pandemic are happening everywhere.

Karibu: What kind of measures have you been seeing in your mapping work so far?

We have seen that most countries around the world have declared some form of states of emergency, which allowed drastic measures to be taken quickly. And during this, a number of countries have introduced measures with the intention of use after the pandemic, have introduced new (unrelated) legislation without protest, have used the restricted civil space to solidify power, and have used this opportunity to continue with ongoing crackdown on minorities and opposition.

One of the first conversations I had when we were reflecting on this project was with a colleague in Myanmar, before there were a large number of cases there. The government made “not reporting an illness” a criminal offense and designated military bases to forcibly intern quarantined citizens. Many political activists fled cities in fear that such a broad definition can be used against anyone the government wants to criminalize. It was very clear that this was very broad, and the state could use their powers in any way they want to.

In Hungary, there were a number new legislation that suggested up to five years in prison for circulating “misinformation.” With such a broad definition, activists fear it will once again allow the government to arrest whoever they see fit. In addition, Hungary declared ‘state of danger’ that allows the government to rule by decree and does not need parliamentary approval. With no set time limit for

this power.

In Switzerland, France, Iran, Israel, Austria, Italy, the Czech Republic, Germany, Slovakia, South Korea, Vietnam, Poland, U.K., Palestinian Authority, the United States, China, and other countries, gatherings of a certain number of people have been completely banned, criminalizing most forms of protest.

The Brazilian president joined protest calling to abolish the supreme court and parliament and to return the military dictatorship. In the Philippines we’ve see extremely violent enforcement especially towards minorities such as LGBTQ people publicly humiliated for breaking shelter at home orders. In Kenya there have been more deaths from police brutality in enforcement of these measures than from COVID-19 itself.

China and Russia have begun employing facial recognition software to track people’s locations, including through developing new abilities to identify people wearing masks. In both countries, which have seen mass protest movements in recent years, masks have been primary protection tools for protestors against state persecution. The normalization of the use of drones for civilian surveillance purposes has also increased in China and Europe, there are electronic tracking bracelets in Hong Kong, tracking of credit card use in South Korea. And we are seeing new surveillance measures every day. The list goes on.

Karibu: Where do you think the line is between a legitimate use of state power to save lives, vs. opportunities to establish a new status quo through repressive measures?

Some of the things are extremely technical. But it often comes down to who is making the decisions, who are the health care experts in the room, and how transparent decision making process is. While some measures may certainly aid in ensuring public health and safety and could be vital in stopping the spread of this pandemic, there should be certain minimum, rights-based standards and considerations for these regulations and policies. Such standards are critical to ensure they are not later normalized and perpetuated once the spread of the virus is controlled. These may include:

- Clear and short time limits for the use of these measures (that can be extended for further, short periods of time as needed);
- Clear regulations about the storage, access, and deletion of private information stored during this time, as well as restrictions on what information is taken;
- Transparent decision-making processes

based on guidance from public health professionals, answering questions such as: Whose professional opinion is being taken in order to decide on such measures? Whose opinion will be taken to determine when they will be lifted?

For example, in Israel - everything is starting to re-open here. Yet the government can still track your phone and justify surveillance for many months going ahead under the banner of the fight against COVID-19. So, time boundness is a huge thing.

The other thing is looking at the goal: If the goal is to keep people at home, then the governments needs to ensure that people have the essentials like food in order to stay at home. But we see in settings where people don't have stable housing (like in slum areas), that authorities are raiding and making arrests of people not "sheltering at home". This then quickly becomes major violations of rights during a crisis period.

Karibu: What do you hope the result of the mapping project will be?

I think we have a couple intended results. First, by being able to map the measures implemented with COVID now, we can then two months later (for example) see if the measures were actually time-bound at all when the COVID crisis becomes less prominent. We can see who actually made the decisions, under what arguments, and when the measures were meant to end. It will be an important tool to know now what has changed.

But we also want to create tools of resistance in a post-COVID world. We want to know what social movements and activists are doing to mitigate these measures, and to show new forms of mobilization and activism that is also taking place.

The pandemic is going to linger with us for a while. There is a need for tools for next steps, and not least for tools to measure these crisis moments in the future. There has been a number of research projects that show that in times of pandemics, states take the opportunity to consolidate power more. Pandemics will happen again after COVID-19. We need to learn from this now.

The "COVID-19 Pandemic Restriction and Resistance Reporting" project is still gathering information on the ways countries are taking advantage of COVID for their own oppressive agendas. The project, run by the American Friends Service Committee (Quaker Service worldwide), includes a crowd sourced mapping tool of restrictions and tools of resistance from different places around the world.

You are invited to fill in information about your country or setting here: https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=lwW5vbx5uEet7Hh_TkKqit-KoWIWN9iZJnF8jH3ftLY1UOTFaQzRIMIU0QkIFTFB-BRFI3VjdIMVU0Ry4u

Sahar Vardi has served three prison sentences for her refusal to be conscripted into Israel's military service. She works with other refusers and serves as Coordinator of AFSC's Israel program in east Jerusalem

Hyperlink: <https://www.karibu.no/newsletter/2020/05/mapping-oppressive-measures-carried-out-in-the-name-of-covid-19/>