

Public Opinion on the Government and Community Responses to Covid-19 Pandemic in Pakistan

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has major implications on the nature of governance and public responses to deal with the crisis. Till the writing of this article, reportedly more than twenty-nine thousand Pakistani citizens have lost their lives due to covid-19. These cases only include the reported patients. As it is observed that a proportionate number of Covid-19 patients are also unreported in Pakistan. This study intends to analyze the public opinion on the government and community responses in dealing with Covid-19 pandemic in Pakistan. Convenience sampling was used through an electronic questionnaire. A sample of 200 male and female population was taken from the youth and middle age groups ranging from 20-45 years. It is being observed that most of the population is satisfied over the government response strategies to deal with the Covid-19 other than the issue of economic uncertainty whereas the majority of the opinion showed dissatisfaction over the community response to the pandemic situation in Pakistan.

Keywords: Covid-19, Pakistan, Pandemic, Government, Community responses

Introduction

The covid-19 pandemic has brought major political, social, and economic transformations across the globe. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in Wuhan, China in December 2019 has altogether changed the dynamics of governance, connectivity, networking, and people-to-people contact. Covid-19 was declared as a global pandemic by the World health organization (WHO) on 11th March 2020. WHO called for a manifold response ranging from major governance-related decisions to the response of the population at the societal and individual level mainly due to its spread across the national boundaries. The situational analysis of the year 2020 illustrates that the

most developed states took emergency decisions in health, education, local governance, travelling and within the scientific community to develop a manifold response strategy to contain Covid-19 pandemic, It is being observed that other than the development of vaccine and scientific innovations to deal with the pandemic, developing states followed the general similar pattern of response strategy in their communities to control the outbreak of the pandemic.

Situational Analysis

Pakistan, being the sixth most populous country in the world reported its first case of Covid-19 on 26th February 2020 when covid-19 infection was detected in two patients who recently came back from Iran. Besides, international travel was completely open. Initially, Pakistan started screening at the Taftan border, and later quarantine centers were established to contain the spread but cases were gradually increasing due to local transmission.¹

Consequently, Pakistan responded to the covid-19 pandemic by imposing a major country-wide lockdown on 15th March 2020. The decisions taken on 13th March 2020 by the National Security Council (NSC) included nation-wide closure of all educational institutes, shut down of government and private institutes, shopping malls, recreational activities, shut down of western borders along with restricting international travel². In addition, necessary services were opened with the observance of Covid-19 precautionary protocols advised by WHO. A media awareness campaign was also launched by the government of Pakistan to give awareness to the people regarding the severity of the virus and ways through which its transmission can be controlled. On the institutional level, National Command and Operation Center (NCOC) was established as the main nerve center to articulate a unified collective response against Covid-19. The official website states that ‘The centre is one window operation to collate, analyze, and process information based on digital input and human intelligence across Pakistan through all provinces, AJ&K, GB & ICT dedicated representatives and centers³. On the other hand, to address the economic fallout, a relief package was announced by the Prime Minister worth Rs.150 billion for low-income families from which each family was given three thousand rupees. Also, the government allowed the consumers, who were utilizing 300 units to pay the bills of electricity and gas in three-month installments. Besides this, petroleum prices were also reduced but for a limited period⁴. The first wave of Covid-19 in Pakistan hit its peak on 21st June 2020 when 4916 cases were reported putting immense pressure on the health sector. Major ease in the lockdown took place when educational institutes, wedding

halls, and recreational activities were completely opened in September 2020. Consequently, in mid-November 2020 an upsurge was seen in the reported cases which resulted in the second wave of Covid-19. Educational institutes in particular were again shut down in December 2020. It was in the first week of January 2021 that phase-wise lockdown was lifted and schools, colleges, and universities were opened. In the meantime, throughout the year, the smart lockdown policy remained intact in those areas where positive cases were reported. A third nationwide closure of educational institutes and 50 percent work from the home strategy was imposed on 15th March 2021 due to the rise in reported Covid-19 positive cases. Currently, Pakistan is in the grip of the third wave of Covid-19 in which 44618 cases were reported⁵ on 27th March 2021. On the other hand, a major development in the shape of vaccination drive was started in February 2021, initially for the health workers and later in the first week of March 2021 for the population above 60 years of age. From 30th March 2021, the age slab from 50-59 years of age was started. Then from June 2021, all age groups till 18 years became of vaccine drive. In addition, government also started the vaccination drive among school children till the age of twelve. A gradual extension of age slab also created a level of acceptance within the society for the vaccine and it also facilitated the government to run the vaccine drive. In this context, this piece of research explicates a trend analysis by incorporating public opinion on government policies and actions on the issue of the Covid-19 pandemic and the response of the people towards the pandemic.

Methodology and Data Analysis

This study was conducted through convenience sampling. An electronic closed-ended questionnaire was developed. For this purpose, a sample size of 200 male and female ranging from 20-45 years of age were selected. Data was circulated through emails and WhatsApp groups. Data was collected from 6th March 2021 to 19th March 2021. Though participants were informed about the purpose of the study but their identification was not asked in the survey. Descriptive statistics in IBM SPSS statistics was used for data analysis.

Results

Q No. 1. Do you agree that the global response to covid-19 pandemic is appropriate ?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent

Valid	3	1.5	1.5	1.5
Yes	133	66.5	66.5	68.0
No	56	28.0	28.0	96.0
May be	8	4.0	4.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

The results show that 66.5 % of the people believe that the overall global response to contain pandemic has been appropriate, while 28% of the people of Pakistan considers the global response inappropriate.

Q No. 2. Do you think that the government of Pakistan responded the pandemic on time in early 2020?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	4	2.0	2.0	2.0
Yes	142	71.0	71.0	73.0
No	52	26.0	26.0	99.0
May be	2	1.0	1.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

A high proportion of population as per this survey is of the view that the government of Pakistan responded to the pandemic on time, while 26% negated this opinion

Q No.3. Do you think that the federal government took appropriate measures to create awareness within the population about the Covid-19 pandemic?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	4	2.0	2.0	2.0
Yes	125	62.5	62.5	64.5
No	64	32.0	32.0	96.5
May be	7	3.5	3.5	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

62.2% of the population showed their satisfaction on the federal government overall response in creating awareness about the Covid-19 pandemic, while 32 % of the people think that federal government did not took appropriate measures in creating awareness among the population

Q No. 4. Do you think that the provincial government took appropriate measures to create awareness within the population about the Covid-19 pandemic?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	3	1.5	1.5	1.5
Yes	105	52.5	52.5	54.0
No	82	41.0	41.0	95.0
May be	10	5.0	5.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

52.5 % of the people showed their satisfaction over the provincial government responses while a proportionate percentage of 41 % are of the view that provincial government did not take correct measures to create awareness among the population

Q No. 5. Do you think that federal government was able to create a consensus among provincial government over responding the pandemic crisis?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	3	1.5	1.5	1.5
Yes	64	32.0	32.0	33.5
No	76	38.0	38.0	71.5
May be	57	28.5	28.5	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

38 % percent of the population responded that federal government was unable to create consensus among the provincial government while 32 percent of the population agreed that federal government was successful in creating consensus among the provincial and federal government, while 28.5 % of the respondents were uncertain on this question

Q No. 6. As a citizen of Pakistan, are you satisfied with the health sector response on the pandemic?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	8	4.0	4.0	4.0
Yes	72	36.0	36.0	40.0
No	104	52.0	52.0	92.0

May be	16	8.0	8.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

More than half of the selected sample showed their dissatisfaction over the health sector response on the pandemic while 36% showed their satisfaction

Q No. 7. As a citizen of Pakistan, are you satisfied with the response of education sector on the pandemic situation?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	3	1.5	1.5	1.5
Yes	94	47.0	47.0	48.5
No	102	51.0	51.0	99.5
May be	1	.5	.5	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

51 % showed their dissatisfaction over the response of education sector while 47 percent people were satisfied with the response of the education sector

Q No. 8. Do you agree that the government of Pakistan was able to cope with the economic uncertainty during the pandemic?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	3	1.5	1.5	1.5
Yes	67	33.5	33.5	35.0
No	112	56.0	56.0	91.0
May be	18	9.0	9.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

More than half of the respondents think that government was not able to cope with the issue of economic uncertainty while 33.5 % of the respondent supported the efforts of the government

Q No. 9. Do you agree that economic packages of the federal government during the pandemic has facilitated the common man?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	3	1.5	1.5	1.5
Yes	62	31.0	31.0	32.5
No	120	60.0	60.0	92.5
May be	15	7.5	7.5	100.0

Total	200	100.0	100.0
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60% of the people think that economic packages of the federal government have not facilitated the common man of Pakistan while 31 % of the people think that economic packages assisted the common man

Q No. 10. Do you agree that Pakistan has upgraded its health facilities during this time period to cope with emergency situation?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Yes	101	50.5	50.5	50.5
No	79	39.5	39.5	90.0
May be	20	10.0	10.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

Half of the respondents think that Pakistan has upgraded its health facilities during the Covid-19 pandemic while 39.5% of the respondents disagreed

Q No. 11. Do you agree that National Command and Operating Centre (NCOC) has been delivering well during the pandemic?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Yes	108	54.0	54.0	54.0
No	51	25.5	25.5	79.5
May be	41	20.5	20.5	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

54 % of the respondents agreed that NCOC has delivered well during the pandemic, while 25.5% of the respondents disagreed and 20.5 % of the respondents were think that probably they have delivered well

Q No. 12. Have you ever believe on such hypothetical theories that covid-19 is not a reality?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent

Valid	Yes	25	12.5	12.5	12.5
	No	170	85.0	85.0	97.5
	May be	5	2.5	2.5	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	

85% of the respondents responded that they have never believed in the hypothetical theories questioning the reality of Covid-19, while 12.5 % responded that they were times when they believe in the hypothetical theories

Q No. 13. Do you think that that generally people followed the lockdown down policy of government?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	59	29.5	29.5	29.5
	No	136	68.0	68.0	97.5
	May be	5	2.5	2.5	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	

Majority of 68% of the people think that people have not followed the lockdown policy of the government while 29.5 % of the people think that people have observed the lockdown policy

Q No. 14. Do you think that people observe social distancing as per the government and world health organization SOPs?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	22	11.0	11.0	11.0
	No	172	86.0	86.0	97.0
	May be	6	3.0	3.0	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	

86% of the respondents think that people across Pakistan have not observe social distancing protocols and SOPs enforced by the government of Pakistan and protocols of WHO whereas only 11% agreed that people have observe social distancing.

Q No. 15. Do you think the people in large follows the guidelines of wearing masks?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	56	28.0	28.0	28.0
	No	139	69.5	69.5	97.5

May be	5	2.5	2.5	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

69.5% of the respondents believe that people do not follow the guidelines of wearing masks, while 28% of the sample think that people observes the protocol of wearing mask

Q No. 16. Do you think that government of Pakistan will successfully start and would able to manage the vaccine drive?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Yes	93	46.5	46.5	46.5
No	52	26.0	26.0	72.5
May be	55	27.5	27.5	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

46.5 % of the people think that government of Pakistan will be able to successfully manage the vaccination drive across the country, while 26% disagreed and 27.5 responded that may be government will be able to manage the campaign

Q No. 17. Will you get yourself vaccinated ?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Yes	108	54.0	54.0	54.0
No	62	31.0	31.0	85.0
May be	30	15.0	15.0	100.0
Total	200	100.0	100.0	

54% of the people responded that they will get themselves vaccinated while a proportionate 31% of the people said that they will not themselves vaccinated. In addition, 15 % choose the option of 'may be'

Analysis

Public opinion on the Government response strategy on Covid-19 Pandemic in Pakistan

The global response strategy to Covid-19 significant in understanding the need for cohesion and a unified response to deal with such an uncertain crisis. Though as per the survey 66.5 % of the people believe that the overall global response to contain pandemic has been appropriate. The existing studies on this issue have been critical in analyzing the global response to the spread of

the Covid-19 virus. It is observed that the global approach to deal with the pandemic ranges from restrict lockdown to minimum restricting meaning that some states responded with extreme and quick measures while others did not. In addition, those states who were able to develop a national unified response strategy by incorporating the health and social guidelines of World health organization were more successful in containing the crisis. Besides this, an interactive scientific community has been viable in developing response strategies⁶. Therefore, state response is one of the pivots in containing the crisis. In this regard, most of the states responded from January to March 2020. 71% of the people think that the government of Pakistan responded to the Covid-19 crisis on time. It was 26th February 2020 when Pakistan reported its first case in Karachi when two people who recently came back from Iran were infected. Though Pakistan responded on time, the overall response of screening, quarantine facilities at Taftan border, and providing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to the frontline workers who were screening at the border was poor which became a cause of the spread of the virus in metropolitan cities Pakistan. Dr. Umer Riaz, at the age of 26, was the first Pakistani doctor who dies due to the corona virus on 23rd March 2020. He was among the ten-member team treating the patients who were returning from Iran and Iraq from the Taftan border without any PPEs⁷. An estimated 7000 pilgrims came from Iran to Pakistan after the outbreak of coronavirus in Iran⁸. While asking about the overall response of the federal government, 62.2% of the population showed their satisfaction with the federal government response in creating awareness about the Covid-19 pandemic, while 32 % of the people think that the federal government did not take appropriate measures in creating awareness among the population. The government opted for a manifold strategy in creating awareness about the spread and severity of coronavirus along with the precautions to contain it. The media campaigns, advertisements, short documentaries, public service messages through television and mobile services along with displaying billboards on streets were main methods used to create awareness. The Ministry of health also uses social media particularly Twitter and Facebook to disseminate information. The national language was used to disseminate information to cater larger audiences.

Figure I

Awareness Campaign of NCOC regarding Covid-19 in Pakistan



Source: Ministry of National Health Services, Regulation and Coordination, Islamabad

Respondents were asked about the provincial government response strategy as well. Results show that 52.5 % of the people were satisfied with the provincial government responses while a proportionate percentage of 41 % disagreed. It is interesting to note that people were more satisfied with the federal government's response to the pandemic as compared to provincial governments. But on the same hand, people showed their dissatisfaction over the role of the federal government in creating consensus among the provinces for a national unified response. 38 % percent of the population responded that the federal government was unable to create consensus among the provincial government, while 28.5 % of the respondents were uncertain on this question. 32 % of the population agreed that federal government was successful in creating consensus among the provincial and federal governments. It is being observed that due to the fact that the ruling government in Pakistan, led by Pakistan Tehrik Insaf (PTI) has its government in Punjab, KPK and a coalition set up in Balochistan, whereas the Pakistan people party is in majority in Sind. Therefore, the response strategy of the Sind government and the federal government has been subject to dissent. This trend explicates that how political dynamics affect the health and socio-economic strategies.

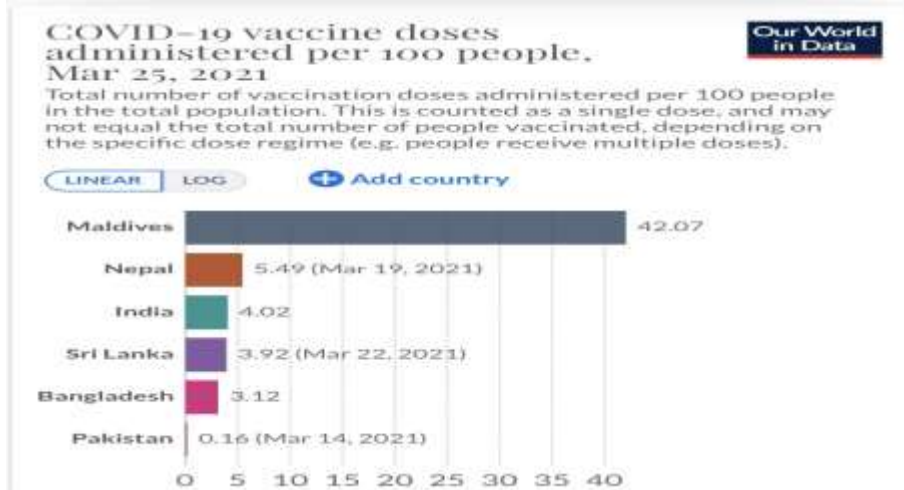
Moreover, one of the major challenges for the government of Pakistan was to cope with the economic uncertainty caused by the Covid-19 restrictions globally, regionally, and at the local level. 56% of the respondents were of the view that the government was unable to cope with the issue of economic uncertainty while 33.5 % of the respondent supported the efforts of the government. In addition, on the economic relief packages, 60% of the people showed their

dissatisfaction over the economic packages of the federal government which means a majority of the population think that these economic packages including Ehsaas emergency program from which 4.9 million to 12 million households were given Rs.3000 each for four months (UNDP, 2020), installment plan for electricity and gas consumers, Rs.200 billion for laborer sector, and a tax refund of 100 billion rupees to the export sector⁹ have not facilitated the common man of Pakistan while 31 % of the people think that economic packages assisted the common man. Another important question in the survey was related to the health and education sectors which are the most affected by the pandemic. 52% of the selected sample showed their dissatisfaction over the health sector response on the pandemic while a sizable portion of 36% was satisfied with the response of the health sector. But on the same hand, 50.5 % of people think that Pakistan upgraded its health facilities during the pandemic to deal with health emergencies while 39.5% believe that health facilities have not been upgraded.

During, pandemic most of the education sector switched to the online mode of teaching, which was an entirely new experience for teachers and students in Pakistan in particular which is highly dependent on the traditional mode. Also, internet facilities and availability of resources to students and teachers were also limited. In this perspective, 51 % showed their dissatisfaction over the response of the education sector while 47 percent of the people were satisfied with the response of the education sector. On questioning about the management of vaccine campaign by the government, 46.5 % of the people think that the government of Pakistan will be able to successfully manage the vaccination drive across the country, while 26% disagreed and 27.5 responded that may be government will be able to manage the campaign. The cumulative percentage of the people who disagreed and were uncertain is more than the people who are convinced that the government would be successful. The following graph reveals that largely Pakistan has been very slow in its vaccinating its population.

Figure II

Covid-19 Vaccination Campaign in Pakistan



Source: www.ourworldindata.com, 2021

Public opinion on the Community responses on Covid-19 Pandemic in Pakistan

The response of the community is pivot in curtailing contagious virus and pandemic situation. In this context, one section of the questionnaire dealt with the public opinion about the community responses. A majority of 86% of the respondents think that people across Pakistan do not observe social distancing protocols and SOPs enforced by the government of Pakistan whereas only 11% agreed that people have observed social distancing. Similarly, 69.5% of the respondents believe that people have not followed the guidelines of wearing masks, while 28% think that people observed the protocol of wearing a mask. This trend explicates the main reason for the local community transfer of the coronavirus. The high population density in city centers, relaxations in the lockdown policy, the lax attitude of consumer and traders, religious factors, lack of enforcement of social distancing protocols by the government, and questioning the reality of coronavirus are some of the main reasons for non-observance. Another significant factor is the political signaling during the first wave of Covid-19 in Pakistan. Many politicians including the Prime Minister and some federal and provincial ministers made dubious remarks about the danger and severity of the virus which negatively affected the attitude and behavioral patterns of the community to observe the protocols. One more common perception which affected the community response is the hypothetical theories questioning the reality of Covid-19. In this context, 85% of the respondents responded that they have never believed in any conspiracy theory regarding Covid-19 while 12.5% responded that they were times when they believe on the hypothetical theories.

This particular result may not truly reflect the perception of the entire population as the sample size belongs to 58 percent of the literate class¹⁰, whereas 40 percent of the illiterate population is not part of the sample and generally has a high tendency of believing on conspiracies related to the existence of coronavirus. On the other hand, as far as vaccination is concerned, the existing studies reveal that the population of Pakistan has a tendency towards vaccine hesitancy¹¹. Conspiracy theories, religious factors, and myths along with disinformation are the main hurdles in the mass inoculation drive. According to the survey, 54% of the people responded that they will get themselves vaccinated while a proportionate 31% of the people said that they will not themselves vaccinated. In addition, 15 % choose the option of 'may be'. This trend explicates that a proportionate percentage of the population expressed that they will not get themselves vaccinated.

Conclusion

In this study on the government and community responses to Covid-19 Pandemic in Pakistan, most people showed satisfaction over the government approach of timely responding to the pandemic and for creating an awareness related to coronavirus within the population. People largely favored the approach of the federal government in comparison to the provincial government. But on the other hand, public opinion was negative regarding government strategies to tackle issues of economic uncertainty, relief packages, and the health sector response. In addition, people had negative opinions about the community response in taking precautionary measures and abiding by the safety protocols. Besides this, a mixed response is reported regarding people's willingness to get themselves vaccinated. In this perspective, vaccine hesitancy and non-compliance with the standard protocols to contain covid-19 can be a major impediment for Pakistan to deal with the spread of coronavirus along with dealing the new variants of Covid-19.

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