The COVID Conundrum

Democracy! The Podcast
Season 1: Episode 3
Air Date: 08/20/2021

Adrienne Ross 0:06

Hi, and welcome to *Democracy! The Podcast* that shines the light on some of the darkest challenges facing the fight for democracy around the globe.

Joe Biden 0:16

Democracy will and must prevail.

Adrienne Ross 0:20

This podcast is brought to you by the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening direct from Washington DC, with support from our friends at the United States Agency for International Development through the Global Elections and Political Transitions Award. I'm your host, Adrienne Ross. Free and fair elections are the hallmark of democracy. And yet, if you think about it, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted hundreds of elections since its onset in 2020. From Singapore to Serbia, from Montenegro to Malawi, even right here in Washington, DC, the COVID conundrum has presented new and endless hurdles for governments everywhere. In a few minutes, we'll get a 360 perspective from Dr. David Ross, the head of the Task Force for Global Health. But first, how do you safely help a nation execute effective elections for the people by the people in a pandemic? We head to Eastern Africa with Program Officer Amy Radlinski to take a look.

Amy Radlinski 1:27

In Ethiopia, it's been a challenging few years. Back in 2018, in the middle of widespread protests, the Prime Minister resigned and Abiy Ahmed took office. In 2019, Prime Minister Abiy was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for ending a 20-year standoff with Eritrea. But it's been tricky ever since. Ethiopia has suffered political unrest, an assassination of a popular singer-activists, violent ethnic divisions, a fragile power grid, rising inflation's and of course, the backdrop to all of this has been the global COVID-19 pandemic. So, this spring in 2020, when the government postponed national elections indefinitely because of health risks, political divides grew and violent fighting spiked. It's a lot for the continent's second most populous country comprised more than 90 ethnic groups. But finally, in June of this year, the nation voted. It was a huge victory for Prime Minister Abiy. The

National Election Board of Ethiopia said his party won 94% of the seats in parliament that were contested in the June round. But not everyone could vote. So now a second round of elections have been scheduled for September and all eyes look to October when Ethiopia's new government is expected to form.

Adrienne Ross 2:43

What a time it has been for our guests in Addis Ababa. Lauren Oing is the Resident Program Director for Ethiopia at the International Republican Institute, where she expertly supports civil society in the political process. Aubrey McCutcheon also joins us from Addis. He is the Senior Resident Director for the National Democratic Institute in Ethiopia. He is an expert on apartheid, human rights, and social justice initiatives. And I find it interesting to note that among their long, long list of accomplishments, both Aubrey and Lauren similarly hold master's degrees from the London School of Economics and have served in the US Congress as a staffer and an intern. Before we talk more about how you continue to fight for democracy in the middle of a pandemic, what can you tell us about the current security situation on the ground? Lauren, can you tell us a little bit about what you're seeing throughout the country?

Lauren Oing 3:40

There's a real battle, it seems, to be for sort of the soul of Ethiopia during this democratic transition process. And we have seen sort of pockets of tension that's been turned into violent conflict over the past year and a half. So of course, the one that's capturing the headlines in the moment is a conflict up in the north, between that's largely between the federal forces and forces that are allied with the Tigrey People's Liberation Front. And then unfortunately, in very recent Monson, recent rates are really beginning to spill over into other areas of the country.

Aubrey McCutcheon 4:20

Addis Ababa is a bit surreal, given the context that Lauren just mentioned in the rest of the country. It is so far peaceful here, but we do notice an increased presence of security forces or roadblocks and so on that are that are now more visible in the city. If you're outside of Addis, as well, the consciousness about security around COVID has waned in recent months. We are concerned that some of the armed conflicts in the gatherings that go with that are going to bring more another surge of COVID but other than that, Addis Ababa has so far been peaceful. There have been a few incidents. But we do anticipate that this could get worse.

Adrienne Ross 5:07

What can you tell us about the attitude of people on the ground in Ethiopia towards COVID?

Lauren Oing 5:13

Overall, Ethiopia's COVID figures look relatively low in comparison to other countries. But I think a lot of that has to do with the reality of what testing looks like on the ground. There just isn't widespread testing. So, we do know it's a problem, but I don't think there aren't good figures on what impact COVID has had on the population here. That said, when you did have the first few cases of COVID, back in March 2020 in Ethiopia, the government here was quite swift, in passing a number of regulations in a state of emergency, which related to management of COVID.

Aubrey McCutcheon 5:49

We're in, I think, now the third surge, the rates have just gone up in the past couple of weeks. Although at the same time, there's now a wider announcement that vaccines are available, as of today, available for citizens 35 years and older. So, at the same time that we're seeing another surge come about, we'll see vaccines come available. That change of behavior that Lauren mentioned, is quite obvious in Addis and even more so outside the Capitol.

Adrienne Ross 6:21

Well, let's go back a few months to this past spring when the national elections were held after several months' postponement, and the government had cited health concerns further delay. What did that delay do to the country's confidence in the electoral system?

Aubrey McCutcheon 6:38

Yeah, the delay was quite controversial. And there are different obviously different views on its impact. Some groups saw the delay as a manipulation by the government in power to delay the elections purposefully using the COVID as an excuse to extend their term in office. Others saw the election delay as a wise to allow the country to come to grips with how to cope and mitigate the risk of COVID during this period before they conducted elections. Still, others have said they've appreciated how much the election board has communicated, especially with political parties about its intentions, the delay the need for what they would intend to do to make election safe for people. There's been more discussion about that in some appreciated, but there is no consensus at all about whether or not the delay of these elections was a good thing for Ethiopia or not. In fact, it was one issue that led to increase controversy between the sitting government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front that is, you know, spilled over and led to an all-out war. And so that delay in elections did trigger quite a number of significant consequences for Ethiopia, regardless of where you stand on whether it was a wise move.

Adrienne Ross 8:04

And Lauren, despite all these challenges with funding from USAID, you were able to continue your programming?

Lauren Oing 8:10

So, yes when we had COVID it really threw a wrench in our plans. IRI was predominantly working with civil society organizations, and we wanted to provide a significant round of capacity building trainings in person was the plan around the regions to help civil society organizations be prepared to engage in conducting better education activities. Well, with COVID, we couldn't travel. And we certainly weren't going to be bringing groups of people together for in person training. So, what we did was we worked with expert trainers to provide remote training, but in a prerecorded downloadable format. So, what we did was after building these modules, we would invite our partners first by email and then we actually shifted to doing invitations by telegram, which is a really popular a messaging application here, to join our trainings, they would register on a brief online form, didn't need a lot of data to do that. And then once the registration period was closed, we would share with them a link to the training material. So, they were all downloadable. Partners were given about two to three weeks to complete the material. And we knew they completed it at the end by completing a completion form online and a brief evaluation. With that, we would then as an incentive, reimburse them by sending them a data mobile phone data package, recognizing the cost of internet here and it also helped us to be able to capture data on comprehension and understanding of the material.

Aubrey McCutcheon 9:51

Our program at CEPPS/NDI is involved in political party development and research and then also on programs to train civil society groups in election observation. Now in our political party program, when COVID came about, we switched immediately to conducting online policy briefings. Now this was a part of our program that we had intended to do in person. And of course, it would have led to a much more fruitful dialogue between parties. And these are multi-party engagements about policy options, whether they be economic policy, social policy, or human rights policy, and so on. These political parties were committed themselves too, we had to shift those online. And that meant that we had far less attendance than we had hoped for originally.

Adrienne Ross 10:40

Have you found the pandemic to be frustrating? Or what have the emotions been like?

Aubrey McCutcheon 10:46

I think, like all of us, many of our partners here locally in Ethiopia felt like this will be over in three months. Let's just wait it out. And we were all optimistic as that and I guess we all still are looking around the corner for this to end. But we've all realized now that we've got to be prepared for the

long haul, got to be prepared to continue delivering the capacity building work that is our mission here, in spite of what happens with COVID. So, we're finding as being as creative as we can find ways.

Adrienne Ross 11:16

And resilient. Lauren?

Lauren Oing 11:19

Yeah, I think one of the most frustrating and trying things about COVID in this period and trying to do this kind of programming is for both of us for IRI and NDI, we're relatively new to the country, we only came back in. We were here before; we were cordially asked to leave in 2005. But we came back in in about mid-2019. And Aubrey and I arrived a few months later, both around the same time. So right when COVID hit, I'd said we'd only really been on the ground as larger teams for about six months, seven months maybe. So, we are really just at the beginning of really developing relationships and trust with our partners. And so, the shift to all virtual that early on into building these really important relationships was difficult.

Adrienne Ross 12:12

And it must have been an enormous relief when the elections were actually held then in June.

Aubrey McCutcheon 12:17

Well, when part one we're here, we're still now waiting on it's a staggered election, now, due to the insecurity and violence taking place in different parts of the country. So, there are a few regions and some constituencies, three regions in full constituencies and other reasons that have not yet casted. And that's scheduled to happen in September, so this is what we've had in this election into two. Of course, that has increased costs for us because we have to deploy all of our election observers or trainers twice for a much smaller effort in September.

Adrienne Ross 12:51

Lauren, can you tell us a little bit what the elections have been like? I mean, the staggered approach was not what was originally intended, right?

Lauren Oing 12:54

There was a lot of interest, there were quite long lines, the official figures on voter turnout are exceptionally high, in the high 90s percent. But I think there are challenges with these figures because of there have been some challenges with voter registration. And then also there's no census data. And so, projections about how many voters there could be, are based on really flawed numbers. So, it's hard to speak very concretely or scientifically about what turnout look like. But in general, there was good turnout, and it was largely peaceful. But I think we were all very, very relieved about particularly given the worsening security context more broadly across Ethiopia, in general, there were few security incidents, and they were pretty isolated. Of course, it does have to do with they didn't hold elections in all locations because of security. So, you're holding elections in places where there's like less likely to be problems.

Adrienne Ross 14:02

Aubrey, you mentioned September for follow on elections and October, do we still expect Parliament to resume?

Aubrey McCutcheon 14:09

Parliament will come back, will resume session, the new parliament in October after the September elections. The risk though is that again, we're in now the third surge, and we're holding elections again in the middle of the surge. The difference this time, then in June, is that there will be more and more vaccinated people taking part in these elections by the time September 6 comes. But that, you know, we have not yet seen, I think, fully enough, whether there's any vaccine hesitancy here. We hear about some, but now there's enough vaccines to make it available to 35 years and over so we're now we're really see who's hesitant for this vaccine and who is willing to take it.

Adrienne Ross 14:54

Lauren, what do you see for the country long term?

Lauren Oing 14:56

I think there should be some optimism about Ethiopia's democratic transition because I do think there have been some really positive steps that have been taken with these elections in sort of in the opening of space for parties and civil society to engage in a way that they hadn't before. There's also been some opening a space with media in the way that they interact. But at the same time, I think we can't get away from the fact that the country is in the middle of a security crisis and a growing humanitarian crisis. And that, quite understandably, will necessarily be a top priority and a top focus, I think, for this new administration.

Aubrey McCutcheon 15:42

Quickly, we're all anticipating what these elections, the COVID pandemic, and the higher security risks we all face, what it will mean over the next year? We know there's a major push for dialogue amongst conflicting parties, what shape that will take? What issues it will focus on, remains to be seen, and who will participate. Will it be inclusive? That seems to be the road to peace.

Adrienne Ross 16:11

We will be watching very closely. Aubrey McCutcheon, Lauren Oing, thank you so much for joining us today.

Lauren Oing 16:18

Thank you.

Aubrey McCutcheon 16:19

Thank you.

Adrienne Ross 16:26

The Task Force for Global Health is an NGO based in Atlanta that counts among their many partners, the CDC, CEPPS through the International Republican Institute, and USAID. Since 1984, their sole mission has been to take on the world's worst diseases to eliminate them or bring them firmly under control to help countries keep people safe. Dr. David Ross is the President and CEO of the Task Force for Global Health. He holds a Doctor of Science and operations research and applied math from the Johns Hopkins University. He joins us now to talk about COVID. Infectious diseases are notorious for presenting huge challenges to democracy and stable societies. What have you witnessed to be the number one challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic?

David Ross 17:14

I think it is public ignorance, public ignorance about the biological nature of a virus, and therefore, public ignorance among public officials about what really is happening.

Adrienne Ross 17:27

In North Macedonia with CEPPS/IRI, you and your team set out to help the region's governments improve their knowledge of Coronavirus. What can you tell us about that experience?

David Ross 17:37

Wow, it was really enlightening, really enlightening. And I'm so glad that my colleague, Dr. David Addison, and I did that because at the time we did that the COVID outbreak was really just beginning or underway, we were a few months into this. We were into the governmental actions, should we shut down things? How much closing down do we do? How much enforcement of masking and that sort of thing, prior to a vaccine being available? What I've learned from that was that we in America, our political culture is one of the founding of the country seeking to maximize your individual liberties over the power of the state. Rather, what we encountered in Bosnia and Herzegovina, those people, they said, look, we're not having this problem. And partly it was because as former Soviet states, the population as a whole was accustomed to being told something by the authorities, and then they would do it.

Adrienne Ross 18:52

Describing the culture that way, then how did you change your approach to working with these governments? What was the number one thing you needed to tell them to do?

David Ross 19:01

They needed less to be told what to do and much more on the side of technical advice and expertise rather than how do you navigate dealing with the public. Heck, in the US, we're all wrapped around trying to figure out how can I get this governor or that governor to agree that recommending the use of masks would be a good thing, whereas for them it's can we get enough masks? At the Taskforce for Global Health, one of our programs is the newly created COVID Vaccine Introduction Program and that couples along with our partnership for influenza vaccine introductions, both of these are partnerships with CDC. We are funded by CDC, the US government, to help countries implement routine adult vaccine programs effectively respiratory virus vaccines, but ultimately if we do this well, they will be the basis for any adult routinely administered vaccine program. And once you have a routine vaccination program in place, you can build upon it for occasional outbreaks of something new, right? Those programs don't exist in many countries.

Adrienne Ross 20:17

Where have you found the pandemic to be the most challenging?

David Ross 20:20

I think in the low- and middle-income world, it was about will we get vaccine to them, and how fast and how much there's a huge disparity equity issue going on in this world. But the challenge with dealing with low-income countries is that it isn't just getting the vaccine there. But it's like I was just

saying, you have to have the ability to move it to where it can be shots in arms. And many countries don't have the infrastructure in place to actually make that happen. So, this is going to go slower, much slower than any of us wish it could. The thing is if there's a takeaway for anybody here listening, I would say, just let's keep reminding ourselves that no one's safe until we're all safe. We have to get the world vaccinated.

Adrienne Ross 21:16

We know the less people who are vaccinated, the more variance, the more space there is for the variants to really develop.

David Ross 21:24

Exactly, exactly. So, the sooner you bring infectivity very low, less than, say, 1% of the population, the less opportunity you're giving a virus to mutate into yet another variant. And once we mutate beyond what our current vaccines do, then we start this whole thing over again.

Adrienne Ross 21:45

And you mentioned the dangerous variants. But as this continues, and we continue to try to vaccinate as many people as possible, what advice are you giving to local and national leaders?

David Ross 21:56

Please get vaccinated.

Adrienne Ross 21:58

These are the easy questions.

David Ross 22:01

I mean, you know, it's our, our vaccine hesitancy program leader Karen Ernst would say to you, when you encounter somebody who is vaccine hesitant, don't tell them just go get vaccinated. Ask them if there are any questions they have that you might be able to answer or that you could help point them to somebody whose advice they might trust, where they could become more informed, and don't create it as an us versus them.

Adrienne Ross 22:35

Is there anything else you would want to add to this conversation that we've had?

David Ross 22:39

I'm really glad that you are looking at this from the point of view of democratic governing, and what does it take to have democratic governance effectively manage something like a pandemic, it is clear that authoritarian kinds of governments that can outright direct thou shalt get vaccinated on the following day at the following place, and make that happen, that when it comes to this kind of response, that ability is good. But we certainly don't want to trade off our democratic governments for that kind of autocratic governing, we have to figure out how to bring strong effective public health response to democratic government.

Adrienne Ross 23:29

Now with his perspective on what the Balkans have endured during COVID Nermin Nisic is here from Serbia. Nermin is the International Foundation for Electoral Systems Country Director in Albania, Serbia, as well as Bosnia Herzegovina. He is a native Bosnian and Nermin, you've worked all over the world in your career in Asia, Eurasia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. You've also served as IFES' Country Director in Georgia and Kosovo. Thanks for being here.

Nermin Nisic 23:59

Thank you for having me.

Adrienne Ross 24:00

What is it been like in the Balkans during COVID?

Nermin Nisic 24:03

I guess it was as challenging as in the rest of the world. What was challenging to us? Here was the elections that were the first ones to be national elections held in Europe since the start of the pandemic, and those were the ones in Serbia, which were initially postponed from March 2020, to June 2020 and were successfully held. Right after that, we had series of other elections in the region, including in Bosnia Herzegovina in November 2020.

Adrienne Ross 24:35

You had to rush to respond to several elections under your purview during the pandemic, can you can you tell us what that's been like?

Nermin Nisic 24:42

It was very important to ensure that elections were credible, and that they were also safe to both voters and poll workers, but also to others who were involved in election process, be it candidates and representatives of the parties. We're learning as we go. Our interventions were informed by IFES' series on COVID-19, a number of which we produced a number of aspects of holding credible elections, but also informed by research that was done locally in each of these countries to be able to deliver better technical assistance and support election administrations and delivery safe elections.

Adrienne Ross 25:29

And safe elections are the key. We've been hearing that all over the world, what is the attitude been like on the ground?

Nermin Nisic 25:35

We did research on this question through a pre-election survey where we asked voters what their concerns are, and if they would go out and vote. And surprisingly, many of them confirmed they have confidence in election administration. And indeed, they went out and voted. This research also pointed to where the potential concerns are when it comes to voters and those were primarily around proximity to other individuals during election process. So, our interventions included ensuring that poll workers organize all polling stations in a way that ensures distance between both poll workers as they are supporting the election operations but also the voters as they are waiting in line and coming in to cast the ballot. And some of those have proven to be challenging because ensuring a proper appropriate distance on Election Day, within a very often small space of typical polling station was a challenge.

Adrienne Ross 26:46

I understand that COVID has made us all very aware of our six feet of space personal space. Your team has published an analysis of lessons learned which our listeners can find on www.cepps.org/podcast, what can you tell our listeners about this?

Nermin Nisic 27:03

We learn that through supporting number of election administrations but also our own research, including and in the Western Balkans. That timely assessment and preparation is the key to ensure mitigation measures. And also, compliance with those measures. Once it's out there, it is very critical. Poll workers often need extensive guidance as to how to arrange safe environmental or the polling stations. and training of poll workers is the key. Also, having an information channel

towards poll workers is very important so that they receive the most up to date information in the days leading towards Election Day, reaching out to voters with information, timely information, but also instructions on how to perform their duty on election day. Once they are the polling station was also important. And we utilize a number of different communication channels to reach out to those. Also, when it comes to supporting election administration's administration in Bosnia and Herzegovina, we help them develop an e-learning platform with the with a training module targeting poll workers, where all of those involved in the election day administration could take advantage of this new tool to avoid face to face interactions. And then to also get most up to date information on how to manage elections under COVID.

Adrienne Ross 28:39

So, a mix of virtual and in person programming is what it sounds like.

Nermin Nisic 28:43

Yes, we've found that that providing multiple tools and multiple channels of information to provide instructions and information to poll workers but also to voters is very critical.

Adrienne Ross 28:56

What do you expect next on the horizon for the region?

Nermin Nisic 29:00

Both countries Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina will hold national elections in 2022. And we are looking forward to utilizing our research but also lessons we all together learn through the election process of during 2020. We do not know what kind of epidemiological conditions we'll have next year. But we with timely preparation which is key in this situation, we believe that we can do a lot to mitigate possible consequences.

Adrienne Ross 29:34

Nermin Nisic in Belgrade, thank you so much for being here today.

Nermin Nisic 29:38

Thank you very much.

Adrienne Ross 29:41

Our friends at USAID have been key in making sure COVID-19 vaccines get shipped around the world. So far 110 million doses have been sent to almost 60 countries to every region of the world and include Pfizer, Moderna and J&J doses according to the White House. While USAID administrator Samantha Power was in Ethiopia recently, she announced an additional $720 million in funding by USAID under the American Rescue Plan Act to help address vaccine delivery and other priorities. This includes $445 million for Sub Saharan Africa to support COVID-19 response, vaccine readiness and urgent humanitarian needs.

This podcast has been produced by the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening through the Global Elections and Political Transitions Award and is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development. Opinions expressed here are those of the hosts and the guests and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the US government and is produced by Evo Terra and Simpler Media. For more information on *Democracy! The Podcast* and to access the complete archives, please visit www.cepps.org/podcast.