

## PANDEMIC AMID UNREST

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The death toll in Iran from the [COVID-19](#) outbreak is more than 3,700, according to the country's official sources. More than 60,000 people have contracted the infection in Iran. Many suspect that the country's official figures are an underestimation. Unlike several other countries where the virus was transmitted by tourists, the epicentre of the [pandemic](#) in Iran was the holy city of Qom — a spiritual centre for Shia Muslims. Qom also gets theology students from China, who could have carried the virus.

The Iranian government, which doesn't seem to enjoy the trust of a large section of the country, has bungled the management of the pandemic. People haven't adequately complied with the [social distancing](#) measures and other guidelines laid down by the global community and the Iranian state. Initially, Iranian health officials had difficulties closing down the country's religious sites. Three days after the official announcement of [coronavirus](#) deaths in Qom, the city's Friday prayer leader opposed the quarantining of the Fatima Masumeh Shrine. The cleric argued that the outbreak was a plot by the enemies of the Islamic Republic to tarnish "the reputation of the sanctuary of Shiites in the world".

The Iranian government has not quarantined all the high-risk areas of the country – Tehran, for example, is not under a lockdown. Moreover, because of the US sanctions, hospitals and doctors do not have access to sufficient medical supplies, masks and ventilators. Tehran's mayor has admitted that because of the sanctions, the city's municipality did not have the capacity to enforce a lockdown. The Iranian government has applied for a \$5 billion loan from the IMF to fight the epidemic — the first time since the Islamic Revolution that Iran has asked for such a loan.

Iran has been in turmoil since November last year, when the government killed more than 1,000 protesters — a major reason for the high level of mistrust. Most Iranians believe that the coronavirus had spread in the country long before the Iranian officials announced the outbreak. But the economic strangulation of the country as a result of US sanctions and the fall in oil prices has compounded matters. The country could face a major social and political crisis if matters don't improve fast.

Unfortunately, Iran's political class has been slow in taking the country's civil society into confidence, even though some NGOs have mobilised resources to contain the outbreak. In the past 40 years, the Islamic government has tried to throttle most civil society initiatives. But today, the enemy is not a dissident intellectual or artist or a woman fighting against the veil. The monopoly of violence that the Islamic State prides itself on does not matter much to the novel coronavirus.

If the pandemic continues, the Iranian conservatives, represented by the clerics and the Revolutionary Guards, will have to open up spaces for dialogue and hold consultations with the country's professional classes. The government has already failed to respond adequately by not paying heed to the opinions of experts. The novel coronavirus is not known to give many chances. In the coming weeks and months, we will know if Iran manages to come out of this crisis.

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