

Mitigating the Impact of COVID-19 through Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) Assistance

The COVID-19 pandemic is not only a health and economic emergency; it is also a crisis for democracy, human rights and governance (DRG) that could undermine or collapse fragile democracies – including many allies of the United States. Ultimately, it could set back decades of U.S. foreign assistance in all sectors and, perhaps most importantly, derail [The Journey to Self-Reliance](#) should governments that struggle to confront this crisis become more dependent on foreign aid.

The pandemic poses severe threats to democratic governance, elections, and transitions. For the first time since 2001, [autocracies now outnumber democracies](#) and authoritarian governments set the stage for this health epidemic to become a global pandemic. In many countries, the crisis will strain citizen relationships with government, intensify political and social tensions, further disenfranchise many voters (including displaced persons and refugees), exacerbate marginalization and inequality, and increase conditions for violence. Rumors and misinformation are spreading quickly and have the power to incite conflict, government crackdowns, and stigmatization. Clear, accurate communications about impact and risk are essential both to keeping populations healthy and safe as well as instilling trust in official sources who are tackling the disease.

Mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on democracy around the world is an urgent matter and must be treated as such **now**; if the U.S. waits until the pandemic is over to address these concerns, it will likely be too late in many countries which could dangerously change the democratic global order as other actors, including China, compete for dominance. It is more important now than ever before for our policy makers to ensure that governance is part of their strategic thinking and planning as they decide on future assistance. Although there are a range of DRG concerns in the face of this pandemic, the U.S. must urgently invest political capital and resources in addressing the following six critical issues:

- **Countering foreign authoritarian influence:** Foreign authoritarian states and non-state actors are employing influence tactics to exploit the COVID-19 pandemic and weaken democracy around the globe. The Chinese government, for instance, is using disinformation to deflect blame for its mismanaged initial response to the outbreak and paint China as a global leader in crisis response - more capable of responding than democracies. As governments ramp up technology purchases to combat the pandemic, they may be enticed by inexpensive offerings from China with surveillance baked in, or efforts to monetize and exploit citizen data. Authoritarian states will also offer leaders quick political wins on investment deals with terms that undermine their countries' future prosperity and independence.
 - **In response:** The U.S. Government needs to provide cybersecurity support and other technical assistance to civil society, the media, legislators, and political parties to identify, expose, and counter authoritarian efforts to depict democracies as incapable of handling the pandemic, and to shore up democratic institutions harmed by malign influence.
- **Preventing the abuse or concentration of power:** Without a strong foundation for democratic resilience, a global health crisis can shock democratic institutions and engender opportunities for

governments to use emergency powers to curtail political rights in the short- and long-term. Where governments continue to expand these types of powers, or refuse to later contract them, democratic institutions can wither. In many countries where the CEPPPS partners operate, authoritarians are using the pandemic as a score-settling opportunity to target opposition or as a means of widening social cleavages through the scapegoating of marginalized groups. Governments – whether well-intentioned or driven by authoritarian impulse – also are tightening their grip on information through “fake news” legislation, repressive cybersecurity regulation, abuse by security forces, or internet censorship.

- ***In response:*** Assistance must be given to governments, legislators, political parties, and civil society to ensure transparency and oversight over emergency measures so that they are inclusive, limited in duration, and proportional to the exigencies of the health crisis to prevent erosion of democratic rights.
- ***Preserving election integrity in a time of crisis:*** COVID-19 presents a serious challenge to credible electoral processes and to the ability of electoral institutions to carry out their mandates. More than [40 countries have postponed poll dates](#) in 2020 due to the pandemic so far. As the world reacts to the pandemic, election authorities must be supported to resist manipulation by political actors, make well-informed decisions about scheduled electoral activities, and coordinate with public health and other authorities. COVID-19 also elevates the importance of electoral oversight for maintaining inclusion, transparency, and accountability; conditions must be preserved or created – including when rescheduling elections – to ensure pluralistic and fair electoral competition, maximum enfranchisement of the whole electorate, and credible electoral oversight by competitors and civil society.
- ***In response:*** Technical assistance should focus on reducing the risk of person-to-person contact and contagion; adapting or strengthening mechanisms to conduct electoral processes remotely without reducing enfranchisement; transparently identifying and procuring materials and equipment needed to administer elections safely and transparently; ensuring that parties and candidates communicate meaningfully with the electorate in light of restrictive contact, facilitating the work of independent election observers; and conducting voter education campaigns that describe the mitigating actions taken to keep voters and poll workers safe, all while enabling inclusive and accessible participation.
- ***Reducing opportunities for corruption:*** An inevitable consequence of the pandemic is the mobilization of taxpayer funds as governments respond to the public crisis within their borders and donors provide much-needed relief to emerging economies. The urgency of the measures needed to contain the contagion and mitigate its socioeconomic impacts creates expanded opportunities for corruption. The risk is acute in countries where public financial management practices are opaque and healthcare systems are corrupt. Losses to graft associated with the most recent Ebola emergency underscore the need for assistance efforts that are accompanied by safeguards to avoid waste and abuse.
- ***In response:*** Transparency and oversight mechanisms should be built into relief packages; redoubling of assistance efforts to undercut kleptocratic networks is required to curb the diversion of official resources that could further strengthen the standing of authoritarian actors in closed and closing spaces.

- **Curbing democratic backsliding and reemergence of conflict:** The pandemic may have outsized impacts on countries in or recovering from conflict, disrupting the flow of humanitarian aid and derailing peace diplomacy. Antidemocratic leaders also might take advantage of the pandemic in fragile democratic contexts to undermine checks and balances and violate other domestic groups' rights or peace agreements. Displaced persons living in crowded spaces are at a higher risk of infection and might overwhelm already weak healthcare infrastructures. As public space closes, both literally and politically, the pandemic may turn back the clock on hard-won progress in increasing access to and participation in public life for marginalized groups.
 - **In response:** Government responses must be inclusive and equitably benefit all citizens; the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic should not be manipulated to further sideline marginalized communities from meaningful engagement in political processes or, worse still, to target them through scapegoating.

- **Reinforcing good, inclusive governance:** The COVID-19 crisis is stress-testing the resilience of governance systems globally, sending shockwaves that could fuel citizen discontent in representative government. Importantly, people with disabilities, women, and other minority groups face heightened risk of illness, violence, and loss of livelihoods. Women are providing frontline care, yet remain under-represented in both global health and political decision-making positions. In the medium-term, donors and implementing partners should expect the backlash against democratic institutions will lead to the collapse of existing political parties, partisan realignment, and the emergence of new parties. Longer-term, the profound shock of this pandemic on societies and economies stands to create opportunities and threats for inclusion and representative government.
 - **In response:** Assistance efforts should prioritize the capacity of representative institutions – legislatures and political parties - to be responsive to the health, economic, and social implications of the COVID-19 pandemic to continue to promote competitive, representative, and inclusive multiparty political systems. Relatedly, support to emergency measures and long-term policy changes should be designed and implemented in a way that is responsive to the needs of those most affected – women and marginalized groups - while fostering their ability to assume formal leadership positions and respond to this and future crises.

USAID's Global Elections and Political Transitions (GEPT) Leader with Associate (LWA) mechanism was designed to meet such "next-generation" electoral and political challenges and to promote resilient, democratic societies. With an unprecedented global crisis now upon us, the CEPPS partners can help ensure that democratic institutions can both survive and rebound from the crisis, and support other long-term core development objectives for the United States Government. Please see **Annex 1** for more detailed information on utilizing GEPT assistance in response to COVID-19.

Annex 1: Utilizing Global Elections and Political Transitions (GEPT) Assistance as Part of the Response to COVID-19

This pandemic isn't just a health crisis; it is a governance system failure, and it will require a governance solution and response. The scale and magnitude of COVID-19 has shed light on the weak health infrastructure and the inadequacy and inequity with regards to health services. Even absent the current COVID-19 crisis, malign actors routinely seek to manipulate or undermine democratic processes or institutions. Findings from the [Varieties of Democracy's \(V-DEM\) Democracy Report 2020](#) are thrown into even sharper relief by the pandemic: "After years of undercutting countervailing forces, rulers seem now to feel secure enough to attack the very core of democracy: free and fair elections." Now more than ever, democracy, human rights, and governance (DRG) programming is needed to empower local partners to build and preserve resilient government institutions, political parties, and electoral processes in fragile states and developing democracies—and to strengthen resilience of democratic reformers in nondemocratic countries.

With this unprecedented global crisis upon us, the objectives of USAID's GEPT program – both foundational and functional – are imperative to ensuring that democratic institutions can both survive and rebound from the crisis. If not, all other core development objectives – be it health, economic, or education – may be threatened. Set out below are core threats and challenges affecting each GEPT objective in the current circumstances, along with key recommendations and DRG program innovations to meet these challenges.

Foundational Objectives and Cross-Cutting Themes:

Meeting the two foundational objectives of the GEPT award is critical to an effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic:

Political empowerment of women, youth, and other traditionally marginalized groups: Marginalized populations are, by definition, more vulnerable to both disasters and crises. These populations, including women, people with disabilities, ethnic and religious minorities and indigenous groups, youth, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) individuals often face: higher levels of poverty; greater food insecurity; less access to formal education and other forms of information; less access to the internet; inadequate healthcare, housing, and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH); and high levels of un-or under-employment. Such barriers and inequalities place marginalized communities at disproportionately higher risk during global health crises. Unfortunately, however, government responses to disasters such as the COVID-19 global pandemic often operate with little regard to the disproportionate and differential impact on marginalized communities and fail to adequately reflect the necessity of fully considering the gender and inclusion dimensions of democracy and governance responses to containment, tracking, and mitigation efforts. As governments focus on disaster and public health responses, the COVID-19 pandemic risks effectively turning back the clock on much hard-won progress in increasing access to and participation in public life for marginalized groups. At the same time, women are at the forefront of responding to this crisis as frontline caregivers and will have much to contribute on both rebuilding societies and preparing to respond to future crises. As such, responses must focus on integrating an inclusive, intersectional gender analysis into all interventions to ensure that the specific needs, risks, barriers, and priorities of women and other marginalized communities are fully considered, that all responses are gender sensitive and inclusive of all segments of the populations, and that these voices are amplified in decision-making. Similarly, a focus on

children and youth is key, as young people are both uniquely affected but also have the potential to play key information sharing and leadership roles in the crises amongst their peers, through technology, etc. This is essential to ensure that longer term government responses are inclusive and equitably benefit all citizens, and that the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic are used as a catalyst for positive social change rather than manipulated to further sideline marginalized individuals from meaningful engagement in political processes.

Key Recommendations:

Ensure that equity is prioritized during COVID-19 assistance by employing an inclusive gender analysis in the design, resourcing, and implementation of responses to COVID-19, such that the disproportionate impacts on and contributions by women and other marginalized groups are centered within efforts to strengthen the ability of democratic governance institutions to respond to and demonstrate resilience in the face of crises of this nature. Such resilience would leverage women at the grassroots, who are managing the COVID-19 response at a community level, to assume political leadership.

Developing the capacity of local and regional organizations in the developing world to supply technical assistance on elections and political transitions: To safeguard [The Journey to Self-Reliance](#), USAID must recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic is also a DRG crisis that could undermine or collapse fragile democracies, setting back efforts at sustainability in all development sectors. The pandemic poses severe threats to rule of law, democratic governance, elections, and transitions. In many countries, the crisis will strain citizen relationships with government, intensify political tensions, further disenfranchise many voters, exacerbate marginalization and inequality, and increase conditions for violence of other crises of democracy. Authoritarian states like China offer leaders an alternative and undemocratic approach to confronting the pandemic and economic crisis that will undermine their countries' future prosperity and independence.

Key Recommendations:

USAID should ensure that the investment it has made in successful political transitions is not lost during this crisis or derailed by COVID-19. Therefore, continued investments should be made in building democratic resilience at the country level through locally-driven, highly contextualized, gender inclusive strategies that preserve international democratic norms. Working with and increasing the capacity of subnational actors will improve prospects for sustainability, given that local officials and institutions play a critical role in the delivery of services and in the implementation of relief and recovery efforts.

In addition to the two foundational GEPT objectives above, donors and implementers must also recognize the following cross-cutting themes to successfully respond to COVID-19:

Countering Foreign Authoritarian Influence (CFAI): Foreign authoritarian states are employing malign influence tactics to exploit the COVID-19 pandemic and weaken democracy around the globe. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is deploying disinformation to deflect blame for its bungled initial response to the outbreak and paint China as a global leader in responding to this crisis. In addition, authoritarian leaders around the globe are using COVID-19 to put in place a state of emergency, under which rights can be curtailed over the long term. There is also risk of non-elected forces such as the military to step in and take over in the name of nationwide emergency. Interventions should highlight the demonstrated success of democracies such as Taiwan and South Korea in combating COVID-19, including through the innovative use of civic

technology, and without resorting to gross human rights abuses. Civil society organizations (CSOs), journalists, political parties, parliaments, and other stakeholders will be critical to upholding key institutions in the face of foreign authoritarian efforts to undermine political processes and promote authoritarian methods of governance, surveillance, and information control as these actors capitalize on the prolonged challenges certain to face fragile democracies.

Key Recommendations:

Partners in civil society, the media, political parties, and parliaments must be given the tools to identify and counter authoritarian efforts to depict democracies as incapable of effectively handling the pandemic. CFAI programming can assist partners in mobilizing to advance democratic solutions and oppose methods promoted by foreign authoritarian states, including censorship, banning of independent media, internet controls and shutdowns, and repression of civil society, which would reduce the transparency and accountability critical to battling COVID-19 and future pandemics.

Technology and the Information Space: Governments, civic groups, political parties, and parliaments need to connect to, gather feedback from, and communicate with all citizens as a fundamental part of their role in a democracy. Pandemics can limit or make this important interaction unsafe. As social distancing becomes the norm, technology is even more indispensable. The effective freeze on face-to-face engagement requires rethinking the ways that democracy can deliver in a digital age. The most likely to lack reliable internet access are also among the most marginalized in society including women, peoples with disabilities, poor and rural communities, older citizens, and ethnic minorities and indigenous populations. Women are often less able to access devices; those not literate in global languages are locked out of content. As such, organizations need to think about broad-reach technologies such as community radio, SMS, and interactive voice response (IVR) while taking advantage of the capabilities of internet-connected citizens. Preexisting risks are magnified in this online era. Democracy demands informed citizens at the same time that disinformation is escalating. Cybersecurity vulnerabilities and online hate speech make it increasingly dangerous for groups and individuals forced to operate online. This will be particularly important for women, who already face high rates of online violence. Governments – whether well-intentioned or driven by authoritarian impulse – are using this crisis to tighten their grip on the internet as its essential role in the public agora increases. Examples include anti-democratic “fake news” legislation, repressive cybersecurity regulation, or internet shutdowns and censorship; these repressive measures can provide justification for policies which will fall heavily on already marginalized populations. As governments at all levels ramp up technology purchases and digital transformation, they are likely to be enticed by inexpensive offerings from China with surveillance baked-in, or fall victims to efforts to monetize or exploit citizen data. CSOs are important partners when combating these threats, although many traditional organizations are inexperienced and uncomfortable with working online.

Key Recommendations:

Program implementation in pandemic conditions should focus on distance- and digital-first design, bearing in mind – and attempting to remedy – differential access. Democratic institutions need support as they attempt crisis programs in digital transformation; government entities, parties, legislatures and civil society groups should be connected for peer learning and problem sharing as well as linked to outside experts. Democratic watchdogs must keep a close focus on blocking regulation restricting increasingly critical internet access or censoring communication under the guise of pandemic response. Programming approaches in this era also should forge new partnerships and peer learning between these

Key Recommendations (cont.):

groups. Cybersecurity evaluations of program design combined with training and support for partners are increasingly critical to keep groups safe in a digital-first climate. All responses should be designed to contribute to closing the digital divide so that women and other marginalized groups have equitable access to online resources and services related to this and potential future disasters.

Reducing Opportunities for Corruption: An inevitable consequence of pandemics is the imposition of emergency powers that exponentially increase the potential for corruption and abuse of power. This includes mobilization of large sums of taxpayers' money, both domestically as well as internationally, as governments respond to the public crisis within their borders and donors provide much-needed relief to emerging economies. The urgency of the measures needed to contain the contagion and mitigate its socioeconomic impacts creates expanded opportunities for the misuse of funds and other forms of corruption. The risk is particularly acute in countries where public financial management (PFM) practices are opaque and healthcare systems are corrupt. The losses to graft associated with the response to the most recent Ebola global health emergency underscore the need for the DRG community to ensure that any assistance efforts are accompanied by the necessary safeguards to avoid waste and abuse. This includes ensuring opportunities for direct citizen oversight of procurement activities through the publishing of timely and transparent data and building in citizen consultations. Besides misuse and siphoning of public and development funds intended to combat the health emergency, corruption also manifests itself in inefficient, ineffective, or opportunistic responses to the emergency. Cronyism and nepotism may worsen when health services are distributed based on relationships rather than need; abuse of state resources may reduce availability of medical supplies or illegally enrich those in power; and parochial interests may override policy decisions based on sound analysis thus resulting in sub-optimal health outcomes. In the medium- to long- term, corruption can undermine citizen trust in the containment and reconstruction efforts and contribute to the erosion of the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

Key Recommendations:

After the initial crisis response, which must be carefully monitored for corruption vulnerabilities, elections and political transitions (EPT) assistance should focus on reducing vulnerabilities to corruption produced by the pandemic as well as preexisting ones that weaken resilience to such crises. Support to executive and legislative institutions must address the myriad facets of corruption that may have been bolstered by the crisis including by strengthening fiscal and public financial management. In more restrictive environments where executive and parliamentary assistance may not be feasible, efforts should be oriented toward supporting civil society and media organizations to investigate and expose the misuse of public funds related to emergency preparedness and response, while protecting the safety of activists and journalists. Such efforts should account for the ways in which women and other marginalized populations are uniquely vulnerable to and targeted by corrupt schemes or processes. In closed and closing spaces, the diversion of official resources can further strengthen the standing of authoritarian actors, which requires redoubling efforts to undercut kleptocratic networks.

GEPT Functional Objectives/Key Technical Areas:

Promoting the meaningful participation of all citizens in their political systems, including women, youth, and other traditionally marginalized groups (GEPT Functional Objective 1): Times of crisis call for whole-of-society efforts and have the potential to be socio-politically transformative. Governments overwhelmed by the response to COVID-19 will benefit from leveraging civil society to fully understand and appropriately prioritize needs and deliver public services. CSOs play a critical role in facilitating communication between citizens and government, including collecting citizen feedback and priorities and articulating support for policies. CSOs can be instrumental in ensuring that there is transparent data related to forecasting models of outbreaks and institutional efforts to plan and respond to crises in comprehensive, inclusive, gender sensitive ways. By tracking institutional efforts and advocating for public health-specific and crisis response policy actions, civil society actors can be government partners in public health efforts while also keeping them in check, especially in contexts where there is democratic backsliding. As social distancing requires many CSOs to shift their approach to online or smaller group activities, many traditional groups are ill-equipped to organize and communicate digitally, and need support and training. These tactics are effectively employed by a range of more internet-native CSOs who can be connected for peer learning and support. In closed spaces, as authoritarian governments ramp up censorship efforts, CSOs may gain support from citizens who ordinarily aren't civically engaged. Despite these opportunities, risk to CSOs in closed societies remains great, as the isolation of self-quarantine could make it easier for officials to disappear or detain activists without public awareness. Outside support and monitoring of activists is critical to ensure their safety and help amplify their voices in effective ways. Even in open societies, social distancing may likely lead to isolation and decreased citizen participation in political life; this is particularly true within already vulnerable or marginalized communities. Pandemic response also provides an opportunity to identify women and other marginalized individuals who are at the forefront of service provision in their communities and foster their entry into formal leadership positions. As during conflict and post-conflict periods, the COVID-19 crisis provides an opportunity to transform power and decision-making structures and make them more diverse, inclusive, and gender sensitive.

Key Recommendations:

CSOs need immediate support in developing participatory, inclusive strategies for public awareness and participation that consider the challenges created by social distancing, as well as crisis response and mitigation. This includes building civil society capacity to adapt current or planned work to amplify public health messages and enhance the work of public health officials. In the medium- to long-term response to the pandemic, the focus of DRG assistance should increasingly look to support the monitoring of government preparedness and effectiveness and strengthening capacity for digital organizing, communication and security training. In many restrictive environments, CSOs have been forced to operate “virtually” on the internet for some time - finding safe and innovative ways to share their skills and techniques with activists in other countries would be an added value that CEPPS is well positioned to provide.

Harnessing the comparative advantages of media and technology to promote citizen understanding and engagement and transparent political competition (GEPT Functional Objective 2): The COVID-19 pandemic is rapidly transforming the information and media systems of every society it touches. The February 2, 2020 [WHO situation report](#) described the “info-demic” surrounding the outbreak as “an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.” As populations stay at home, they are likely to consume even more media than usual, whether news or entertainment content, via traditional outlets or new/social media outlets. While media more broadly will play a key role in this pandemic, reporters in particular play the role of intermediaries between the government, public health experts and the public and are best positioned to stem the info-demic. However, this can be challenging for three reasons. First, some governments are making this difficult, whether by failing to provide timely or accurate information to journalists due to lack of information or relationships, or more concerningly by misleading the public and reporters, concealing information, and using the crisis as justification to suspend human rights, elections, and checks on their power. Some tout the ‘success’ of China’s authoritarian response to the virus and seek to emulate it. Journalists may have come to the profession to fight these battles, but their communities are living in more immediate fear and looking for information that meets their basic need to survive. Second, many journalists, particularly in smaller media outlets, may lack training and capacity in how to report responsibly on issues like health crises and may find themselves outside of their wheelhouse. Finally, news media can struggle to fill the role of trusted intermediary because in many contexts, from ethnic minorities during the Ebola outbreaks in West Africa to efforts to eradicate polio in rural Pakistan, official media and the government itself are not trusted by the population. This creates some scenarios where valid official information is not only ignored but countered by the population itself, undermining pandemic control efforts. When the crisis ends, journalists will find themselves in a much stronger or weaker position. Either the public will view a free press as essential to national resilience, or authoritarians and their allies will make them a scapegoat for their own failings.

Key Recommendations:

Trustworthy information saves lives and is more important now than ever. As such, USAID should work to identify where people get information already and invest in trusted sources, rather than focusing on a pivot to unfamiliar technology or sources. Assistance must focus on building the skills of local reporters to safely and accurately cover complex health issues by supporting the dissemination of information in local languages. Supporting trusted, community-based media is a crucial part of ensuring accurate information on the coronavirus and its impact is accessible and useable. News media should also be complemented by other creative media, which can amplify health messages as well as promote good governance and democracy during times when media consumption is likely to be high as citizens remain home.

Supporting meaningful transition processes that establish positive precedents for effective democratic governance (GEPT Functional Objective 3): The COVID-19 health crisis is affecting conflict and transition processes around the world in many ways. As the [International Crisis Group](#) points out, “the disease disrupts humanitarian aid flows, limits peace operations and postpones or distracts conflict parties from nascent as well as ongoing efforts at diplomacy.” It can also re-introduce and/or exacerbate inequities among men and women and the forced retreat of women from the public sphere to private sphere. Antidemocratic leaders might take advantage of the pandemic and their countries’ fragile context to undermine checks and balances,

extend their powers, govern by decrees, and violate other domestic groups' rights or peace agreements, instigating public dissatisfaction and conflict. Refugees and other populations displaced by war and conflict living in crowded spaces are at a higher risk of infection and might overcharge already weak healthcare infrastructures. Many political transitions and democratization processes are likely to suffer significant setbacks during this health crisis. USAID has an important role to play in protecting and advancing the gains made in countries going through democratic political transitions, especially in strengthening incipient institutions so they can safeguard democratic principles. Support to civil society also will be needed to ensure government oversight and transparency during these critical times. At the same time, COVID-19 creates some unanticipated opportunities to engage constructively with governments on issues that could strengthen democracy and good governance. In countries where civil society historically has had an adversarial relationship with the government or where the government has not been interested in constructive reforms, the fight against COVID-19 creates a common agenda that civil society and government can align behind, and many efforts to fight COVID-19 can actually bolster democracy. For example, increasing access to free media both helps broaden communication about COVID-19 prevention and lays a groundwork for longer term freedom of expression. Similarly access to the internet, outreach to marginalized communities, and effective rumor management all are important to COVID-19 prevention but also to better democratic practices overall.

Key Recommendations:

Assistance should take into consideration the new threats to transition processes created by the health crisis, such as extended and unchecked powers to leaders in fragile states. It should also take into consideration how the pandemic is impacting the capacity of fragile governments to deliver basic services to the population, potentially instigating more public dissatisfaction, instability, and conflict. USAID should encourage creative opportunities to engage governments in closed and closing countries in constructive ways that can contribute to transitions and increased respect for democracy and rights.

Promoting the integrity of elections as a sustainable vehicle for peacefully and democratically choosing leaders (GEPT Functional Objective 4): The pandemic presents a serious challenge to credible electoral processes. As of this writing, [more than 40 countries have postponed poll dates](#) in 2020 due to the pandemic (many for an indeterminate period as they struggle to determine what type of changes their laws will accommodate). On the *supply side*, it is essential that election management bodies (EMBs): resist manipulation by political actors who seek to reschedule elections under terms that give them advantages; make inclusive, transparent and well-informed decisions about scheduled electoral activities; and work in close cooperation with public health and other authorities. In order to effectively adjust to COVID-19, EMBs must also: implement measures that reduce the risk of person-to-person contact and contagion, while ensuring pluralistic competition; adapt or strengthen mechanisms to conduct electoral processes remotely (e.g., poll worker trainings and voter registration), while preventing disenfranchisement that results from the digital divide; identify and procure materials and equipment needed to administer elections in a safe manner (e.g., hand sanitizers, masks for officials, party agents, and observers in the polls, and tape to mark queue positions); and conduct large-scale voter education campaigns (with an emphasis on ensuring inclusivity and accessibility) that describe the mitigating actions taken to keep voters and poll workers safe. Of concern, measures adopted to decrease risk of transmission in elections could further marginalize groups that are already excluded from electoral processes. As such, it is critical that these mitigation measures are designed with the most marginalized in mind. On the *demand side*, citizen election monitoring organizations from many countries participate in global and regional networks to share best practices. Those networks, along with other civil society groupings, are mobilizing to spread accurate information and monitor factors that marginalize

vulnerable groups during the pandemic. CEPPS partner the [Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors \(GNDEM\)](#), for example, is sending messages to its regional networks and 240-member groups in 89 countries about taking COVID-19 factors into account, as groups in Mali, Sri Lanka and elsewhere are doing.

Key Recommendations:

Immediate assistance should enable electoral stakeholders to make inclusive decisions regarding holding to established dates for voter registration and polling while employing measures that incontrovertibly mitigate risks of spreading COVID-19. Where that is not possible, efforts should be made to adopt postponements while implementing such measures and respecting standards for fair competition and full voter participation. Assistance also should ensure that decision-making about adopting new technologies to safeguard public health during elections is transparent and inclusive and carefully considers how technologies may heighten risks to electoral integrity via disenfranchisement, cybersecurity, and disinformation. Medium-term assistance should build linkages between citizen observation, health advocacy, women’s rights, older citizen advocates, and other groups to conduct civic and voter education around the virus, including electoral preparation that takes the virus into consideration. Such assistance also should build these groups’ capacities to monitor threats to electoral integrity resulting from the crisis that particularly affect such vulnerable populations. Related training and other capacity building, as well as reporting and advocacy, could be done largely through innovative uses of technology already employed by CEPPS partners. Where elections are not feasible in the short-term, careful consideration should be given to measures that ensure the continuity of governance, protection of institutions and fundamental rights of individuals.

Facilitating the ability of elected political actors to fulfill their responsibilities to citizens through better governance practices (GEPT Functional Objective 5): While the initial response to the impacts of COVID-19 has focused on health services, the quality of a country’s democratic institutions will condition every aspect of response to this pandemic. Individuals rely on their governments for the organization of collective responses. To be effective, these responses must be well-coordinated with other actors, deliberately inclusive of all citizens (particularly marginalized communities), gender sensitive, clearly and consistently communicated, and managed transparently to ensure trust and accountability. The head of state needs to inform and calm a nervous nation through regular communications that are evidence-based, comprehensible, and responsive to citizens’ daily lives and needs. Building citizen trust requires solutions and messages emanating from broad political consensus. In the COVID-19 context, legislative bodies are struggling to find ways to convene, deliberate and engage with constituents -- without putting themselves and others at risk of contracting the virus. In recent days, several parliaments, including New Zealand, Maldives, Afghanistan, and the European Union, have adopted new procedures to allow for virtual and/or digital participation of members in plenary debates and other legislative business. In exercising their check and balance role, legislatures are often the best line of defense against presidential power grabs that might include sweeping emergency powers or abuse of state resources. While governments need to turn to digital service delivery and virtual citizen engagement, many lack the capabilities and will be tempted to turn to China or other anti-democratic suppliers. USAID has a critical role to play in strengthening government capacity to respond to this unprecedented global challenge by providing credible information, addressing citizen needs through adequate public service delivery and furthering avenues for the inclusion of vulnerable populations, while also ensuring that the crisis is not exploited by autocrats bent on extending their power and limiting citizens’ rights. Some ostensibly pro-public-health technology-based disease monitoring measures have deeply troubling anti-

civil-liberties implications. Already in many countries, CEPPS teams have noted troubling signals that authoritarians are using the pandemic as a score-settling opportunity to target opposition or civil society leaders for repression or as a means of widening social cleavages through the scapegoating of marginalized groups.

Key Recommendations:

Assistance to all branches of government must encourage decision making processes that are transparent, evidence-based, inclusive and responsive to citizen needs, particularly those of vulnerable groups. Inclusive communications strategies must reflect cross-party unity, counter disinformation threats, and reinforce civic solidarity to promote collective action. Building transparency and accountability mechanisms at all levels of government, including efforts to enlist subnational officials in providing input and local support on response strategies, is necessary to reduce the potential for corruption and to ensure successful response strategies.

Promoting competitive and representative multiparty political systems (GEPT Functional Objective 6): The COVID-19 crisis will test individual political parties, the relationship between citizens and political elites, and the relationships between political parties. The effects of the pandemic will send shockwaves across the political system, potentially fueling ongoing citizen discontent and public distrust of representative government. In some cases, the urgency of life-and-death situations and the need to alleviate human suffering will lead some political parties to rely even more heavily on patronage-based approaches, reinforcing winner-take-all tendencies, fueling abuse of incumbency, and potentially deepening polarization. Under the guise of the emergency and the need to respond quickly, some legitimate opposition voices will be sidelined even further. In other cases, the pandemic will push parties to work constructively across party lines to respond. New actors are also likely to emerge from social movements, from splits within existing parties, or from reform champions that see public goods provision as key to improving their party's electoral prospects following an eventual return to the status quo. While some parties will struggle to adapt and remain relevant, others will find opportunities to develop even stronger relationships with citizens, setting new precedents that can be scaled up. The crisis also will highlight the human cost of party policies that are designed and implemented without inclusive citizen participation and without sufficient policy expertise. Where parties fail to respond adequately, the current crisis of representation will deepen further, fueling protests and potentially the rise of new political groups (democratic and undemocratic). Given the average age of most political leaders, the pandemic may also take a toll on the political establishment, creating opportunities for elite renewal. Thus, as various risks to vibrant multiparty systems emerge, so will opportunities for expanding citizen-centered approaches to political party development.

Key Recommendations:

In the short-term, DRG interventions should help citizens and political parties adopt practices, including the use of analog and digital technology, that allow them to safely exchange information about the pandemic, its impact on citizens (especially women and other marginalized populations), and how government responses can be improved. Short-term efforts must help political parties hold the line against those who will exploit this crisis to restrict political space or suppress alternative voices. In the medium- and longer-term, each country will need to draw lessons learned from their response to the crisis and tackle the impacts of the pandemic on service delivery across a wide range of sectors. Efforts should focus on helping citizens and their parties and political leaders (old and new) engage each other

Key Recommendations (cont.):

on these policy issues and to participate in constructive cross-party dialogue on the choices each society will face. To support citizen-centered approaches that increase citizens' ability to influence policy processes, donors and implementers working with political party partners also should explore avenues for inclusive, non-partisan, cross-sectoral interventions. CEPPS is well positioned to facilitate constructive engagement between political parties and issue experts who could help improve the quality of and debate over public policy proposals for a variety of sectors – which would support healthy competition that offers citizens meaningful choices.

Ensuring respect for the application of impartial legal frameworks and compliance of political actors (GEPT Functional Objective 7):

Democratic elections both *require* and help to *preserve* the rule of law in society. Impartial electoral and political legal frameworks provide the rules by which states can peacefully transfer political power, protect fundamental rights, ensure inclusive participation, and permit citizens to hold their elected officials accountable. This is even more true in a time of emergency, when governments wield even greater legal power – including to suspend certain fundamental rights. While international human rights law provides an [established framework](#) to evaluate the measures that many governments are putting in place to respond to and mitigate the outbreak of COVID-19, evaluating what is an acceptable derogation in practice is complicated. [Scholars have rightly noted](#) that “many of the most grave and systematic human rights abuses occur during public emergencies, when states employ extraordinary powers to address threats to public order.” Where governments continue to expand these types of powers, or refuse to later contract them, democratic institutions can wither. Having worked for decades with countries that face risks of backsliding toward instability, economic stagnation, and/or autocracy, CEPPS recognizes that a common denominator is frequently the manipulation of legal frameworks for political gain in both overt and subtle ways. Early responses to the COVID-19 crisis suggest that [fundamental democratic freedoms are under threat](#) in some countries by the implementation of emergency measures that do not stay within established democratic guardrails. The current global crisis magnifies both the potential for democratic backsliding and the imperative for democracy and the rule of law to preserve fundamental freedoms.

Key Recommendations:

The protection of foundational civil and political rights during the pandemic is fundamental, and assistance must be given to governments, legislators, and civil society to ensure that emergency measures being designed and implemented are not used to erode legal frameworks and democratic rights. Assistance to institutions and legislators that ensures they are meeting international standards, providing fora for consultation, helping CSOs and legal communities improve their efforts to monitor the implementation of laws and rules that strengthen mechanisms for investigation and complaints, and suggesting both de jure and de facto protections against abuse are more important now than ever. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity to ensure that DRG priorities are incorporated into country-level reform efforts around the globe to revise and improve disaster and emergency response frameworks so that we are better prepared for such crises in the future.

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