1

Reports

Eight Heads of States versus Coronavirus: A Leadership Comparative Question – Part 1

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1

Lebanese workers disinfect classrooms in Rmeileh, south of Beirut [February 2 2020 AFP]

The spread of the new Coronavirus, COVID-19, and its psychological impact and economic ramifications worldwide have not affected every nation for itself only; but, also raised questions about the variety of governance – of lack of – approaches adopted by various governments across the globe. The number of infections reached 1,519,442 with 88,543 deaths; whereas 330,890 individuals recovered worldwide, according to Worldometer.info on April 9. While dealing with the growing human fatalities and deepening economic crisis, the defining line between 'crisis management' and 'leadership' has become blurry. In crisis times like the spread of the pandemic for four months now, individuals follow closely not only the statements and decisions of their leaders, but also their face expressions and the tone of their voices. They expect them to embody their political raison d'être and how to sail through rough times. The current moment in 2020 also suggests an implicit comparison of various approaches and strategies; and what we can learn from "how some of history's iconic leaders acted in the face of great uncertainty, real danger, and collective fear" (1).

Four months after the spread of the virus originally in the Chinese 11 million-inhabitant city of Wuhan, a fundamental question lingers across distant capitals: what is each state's exit strategy in the absence of a globally-unified plan of action beyond the statistics and guidelines offered by various capitals and the World Health Organization (WHO)? There have been no clear-cut

indicators of progress in the battle, expect the hope that the radius of infections would decrease, either by the forced confinement in most countries or a rise in temperature in the coming weeks. The apologetic narrative, which has characterized the current challenge as an 'unprecedented crisis', has turned into "a politically convenient cliché, implicitly letting leaders in many Western nations off the hook for their manifestly slow and insufficient responses to the pandemic (2)."

Battling his first major crisis in office, Italy's Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte was the first EU leader to quarantine his nation, and has seen the public largely rally around the government, whereas many of his political foes considered him an 'accidental' prime minister who could fall within months. (3) In neighboring France, President Emmanuel Macron mobilized his nation cautioning against "a war", as a dramatic refrain he repeated six times in his speech March 16. He explained France was against an "elusive enemy, and the measures were unprecedented, but circumstances demanded them." (4) Consequently, he ordered a total lockdown and his approval ratings had an unprecedented spike in March. According to a Harris Interactive opinion poll for LCI television, Macron had the "confidence" of 51 percent of his fellow citizens, a 13-point increase compared to the previous month and the highest since January 2018

Unlike Macron's "war" discourse, German Chancellor Angela Merkel calmly appealed to her fellow citizens' reason and discipline to help contain the spread of the new pandemic. In her first address to the Germans, she recalled her upbringing as a young woman in East Germany; and how difficult it was to give up freedoms, yet as a trained scientist emphasizing that the facts do not lie. Global news reports praised her with headlines such as "Merkel shines in handling of Germany's Coronavirus crisis". (5) To the south of the continent, Spain's infection cases and deaths increased significantly in March and the first week of April. 148,220 Spaniards got infected, 14,792 died, and 48,021 recovered. Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez had described the coronavirus crisis as "unprecedented challenge". Across the strait of Gibraltar, Moroccan authorities shifted into a shutdown of the public sphere mid-March, with a rather heavy security-driven paradigm in battling the pandemic. Despite his defensive tone of his government's approach, Prime Minister Saadeddine El Otmani left doubts about the country's hospital capacity to accommodate new cases of infections after his primetime interview on three national TV networks April 15. The total of Coronavirus positive cases jumped from two cases, an adult and an old woman, coming from Italy late February to 1275, confirmed cases, 93 recovered, and 97 deaths by April 8.

To the north across the English Channel, embattled with the infection himself, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson was appreciative of the efforts by doctors, pharmacists and other public health professionals ended up in an intensive care unit in a London hospital. Across the Atlantic, the United States became the new epicenter of the pandemic by 435,160 confirmed infections and 14,797 deaths on April 8. President Donald Trump extended federal guidelines on social distancing, after a top health official warned between 100,000 to 200,000 people could die from coronavirus in the United States. (6) He shifted once again to blame politics, and accused the World Health Organization of being "China centric" and "biased" towards his rival superpower (7).

To the east of the globe, China's management of the pandemic turned into a double-edge sword. It has positioned itself to be the doctor and the lab of the West, and offered medical assistance to Italy and Spain. (8) President Xi described his country's medical assistance for Europe as an effort to further a "Health Silk Road," stretching his Belt and Road trade-and-infrastructure initiative. However, Chinese officials have been criticized for mounting a 'propaganda campaign', or information warfare, to make certain Western states look like the Three Stooges. The BBC reported the Dutch health ministry decided to recall 600,000 'Made in China' face masks. The equipment was used by front-line medical teams. (9) EU chief diplomat Josep Borrell warned that there is "a geo-political component including a struggle for influence through spinning and the 'politics of generosity'." He points out "China is aggressively pushing the message that, unlike the US, it is a responsible and reliable partner." But, he emphasized

"armed with facts, we need to defend Europe against its detractors." (10) Some Western observers have noticed Coronavirus has turned into "a public relations disaster for China". Kenneth Rapoza of Forbes argues "For sure, China will recover from the coronavirus before it recovers from this face plant with its big investors in the West. The longer this disease ravages the U.S. and Europe, the more it turns into a public relations disaster for the Chinese government (11) ."

This two-part paper probes into whether there is presumably a 'textbook' for leaders at times of crises to learn from and make comparisons. It examines the approaches of eight leaders toward the containment of the pandemic, taking into considering two main factors: a) most hard-hit countries by the spread of Coronavirus, and b) disparity of crisis management strategies adopted by those heads of states. The sampling cases spread across four continents with a particular focus on Italy, France, Germany, Spain, Morocco, Britain, the United States, and China. The paper also aims to assess the categorization of those leaders as 'de facto leaders', as they struggle with the pandemic nightmare, vis-à-vis 'real leaders' when they turn a crisis or any other chaotic situation into an opportunity of wisdom, innovation, and inspiration. Real leaders can also be defined as people who "help us overcome the limitations of our own individual laziness and selfishness and weakness and fear and get us to do better, harder things than we can get ourselves to do on our own." (12) This comparative study examines the interconnectedness between managing a public health crisis and capitalizing on the challenges of eradicating Coronavirus for political and strategic purposes among certain leaders. Chinese diplomats have accused certain Western governments of implying a "Cold War mindset" for labeling China a threat, and hindering the Chinese foreign policy.

British PM Boris Johnson while managing the COVID-19 crisis [Reuters]

Twenty-two days after the World Health Organisation declared coronavirus a "pandemic", the total of infection cases reached 1,519,499 with 88,549 deaths in at least 180 countries April 8. These figures leave out other undetected cases due to certain governments' limited capability of testing or disparity of demographic concentration between urban and rural areas. The epicenter of the infections has shift from China in January and February, to Italy in March, and the United States by the beginning of April. Other countries are close in numbers such as France, Spain, and Iran. A four-month public health dilemma has put world leaders on different tracks of action with the hope of containing both health risks and economic losses. Director General of the World Health Organization Tedros Ghebreyesus described the situation not as a health crisis only, but also a social and economic crisis. He stated, "If countries rush to lift restrictions too quickly, the virus could resurge, and the economic impact could be even more severe and prolonged. Financing the health response is therefore an essential investment, not just in saving lives, but in the longer term social and economic recovery (13)."

Caught off Guard

Most world leaders, if not all, were taken by surprise when Coronavirus invaded their protected borders, sneaked through airports, shut down most public and private businesses, and became the white elephant in the room. Former U.S. Secretary of Sates Henry Kissinger once said, "Next week there can't be any crisis. My schedule is already full". This famous phrase has revealed an ironic tendency among world leaders not to take a pre-Coronavirus reality or 'status quo' for granted. It also exposed their failure in projecting possible scenarios of a 'nature-

made' or 'man-made' disaster. In their working paper "*Crisis Management: Framework and Principles with Applications to CoVid-19"*, Peter Nathanial and Ludo Van der Heyden point out how governments regularly suffer from delusion or forgetfulness when it comes to crisis, as the current CoViD episode attests. Italy is experiencing a tragedy that France now desperately seeks to avoid. The US is next. All these countries looked East and did not seem to fathom the gravity of the situation unfolding in China, or seemed to freeze (14)."

There has been a double-edge quantitative and qualitative dilemma at once in dealing the vast numbers of tests and adequate testing protocols across the globe. There has been no one consistent, or standardized, approach to identifying new infection cases. Professor David Heymann of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine highlights that "testing is being done in different countries in different ways and for different purposes… The cases that are really mild and go undetected and unreported – that's 80 percent of cases, and some infections are asymptomatic." (15) The common wisdom expects the process to be simple by taking a swab of one's nose or throat, and having it sent off to a lab to look for signs of the virus's genetic material. For example, British health officials do not enough resources to do mass testing. The government in London bought three-and-a-half million antibody tests, but they are not yet available to use. The tests are still being checked to make sure they work, as reported the BBC. On April 2, British Health Secretary Matt Hancock stated, "We have the best scientific labs in the world but we did not have the scale. My German counterpart for instance could call upon 100 testing labs ready and waiting when the crisis struck." (16) Across the Atlantic, Anthony Fauci, the U.S. director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, pointed out ""It's unpredictable. Testing now is not going to tell you how many cases you're going to have. What will tell you ... will be how you respond to it with containment and mitigation (17)."

Donald Trump at the National Institutes of Health's Vaccine Research Center in Maryland [March 3 – Reuters]

Brian Klaas, assistant professor of Global Politics at University College London, explains how in crisis times "the window of what governments can get away with without pushback from the public tends to expand. If a 'rally round the flag' mentality kicks in around the world, leaders could find ways to exploit it. If you accept 9/11 made people happy to give up certain liberties, consider this: The Imperial study says there will be 2.2 million deaths in the United States if there's no extreme and sustained government intervention. That's the equivalent of 9/11 happening nearly every day for over two years (18)."

From a practical perspective, Kenneth Chenault, who was named chairman and chief executive officer of American Express five months after the attacks of September 11, 2001, notices that in a crisis, with even the most rational strategy, there has to be a trust. Another two necessary steps are decisiveness and setting priorities. As he summarizes some of the lessons learned, "we were decisive, we demonstrated compassion. And from a communications standpoint, we connected the dots. You have to be visible. (19) Some strategists highlight the need for 'Judo leadership' and emphasize the need for countering stress. The primary role of leadership in times of crisis/disruption is "to counter the mood with values-based conversations balancing 'deliberate calm' and 'bounded optimism' while demonstrating empathy and communicating effectively - maintaining transparency, clear expectations, and providing frequent updates." (20) Other views highlight the need for resilience, innovation, and for pushing the boundaries of one's nation, one's team comfort zone as an imperative in leading in crisis (21).

With an alarmist title *"Leadership in a crisis: Responding to the Coronavirus Outbreak and Future Challenges"*, Gemma D'Auria and Aaron De Smet capture the seriousness of the problem in the four corners of the world since the beginning of 2020. They wrote, "What leaders need during a crisis is not a predefined response plan; but, behaviors and mindsets that will prevent them from overreacting to yesterday's developments and help them look ahead." (22) Other crisis managers advocate a more nuanced multi-dimensional approach in shifting individuals' minds and hearts from over-internalizing fear and anxiety. For instance, Warren G. Bennis, founding chairman of the school's Leadership Institute at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, notices how individuals and groups, a war or a pandemic, want a great deal more. He wrote, "want leaders with Winston Churchill's ability to articulate the common threat and inspire people to overcome it together. During a long siege, people look to their leaders for hope. Above all, they want those leaders to be individuals who are capable of greatness and who aspire to it (23)."


Angela Merkel addresses the media at a press conference before going into quarantine [Getty]

'Real Leaders' or Virtues of Leadership in Crisis

The Coronavirus era puts the spotlight on various styles of leaders around the world, and echoed the legacy of a few prominent crisis-forged leaders. I am of the opinion that to ask hard questions about what the government has, so far, got right and wrong is "not to needlessly politicize a crisis: it is to hold our leaders to account in order to ensure that mistakes do not continue. Some aspects of government [anywhere] have inspired great confidence in the last week, others have sowed apprehension and trepidation among scientists and experts (24)."

Nancy Koehn, professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School has studied courageous crisis leaders for two decades. She rejects the notion that 'leaders are born leaders.' Instead, she argues "real leaders are not born; the ability to help others triumph over adversity is not written into their genetic code. They are, instead, made. They are forged in crisis." (25) Koehen's argument sounds quite revolutionary to the Hegelian assumption "not all men are bore to lead." Philosopher Georg W. F. Hegel took into consideration unequal talents and abilities among men. He wrote "men are made unequal by nature, where inequality is in its element, and in civil society the right of particularity is so far from annulling this natural inequality that it produces it out of mind and raises it to an inequality of skill and resources, and even to one of moral and intellectual attainment. To oppose to this right a demand for equality is a folly of the Understanding which takes as real and rational its abstract equality and its "ought-to-be" (26)."

The struggle with the new pandemic represents a moment of deep reflection and evaluation of leaders' strategies for the present and visions for the future. Hegel maintained what is real is reasonable, what is actual is rational, and World-Historical individuals are World-Spirit's agents. He wrote: "Such are great historical men—whose own particular aims involve those large issues which are the will of the World-Spirit." (27) Hegel's conceptualization of leadership and its cognitive and moral prerequisites seems to imply some of Plato's selective argument of who deserves the status of leader. He favored that only the most intelligent, the *"hoi aristoi"* in reference to dissent elite or 'best people', that whose consciousness have awakened to the universal mind should assume roles of leadership. (28) Another philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche depicted a strong connection between being a leader and being able to deliver the public service within a sense of moral nobility. he wrote "the goal of humanity lies in its highest specimens" in his 1876 book "*Untimely Meditations*" (29).
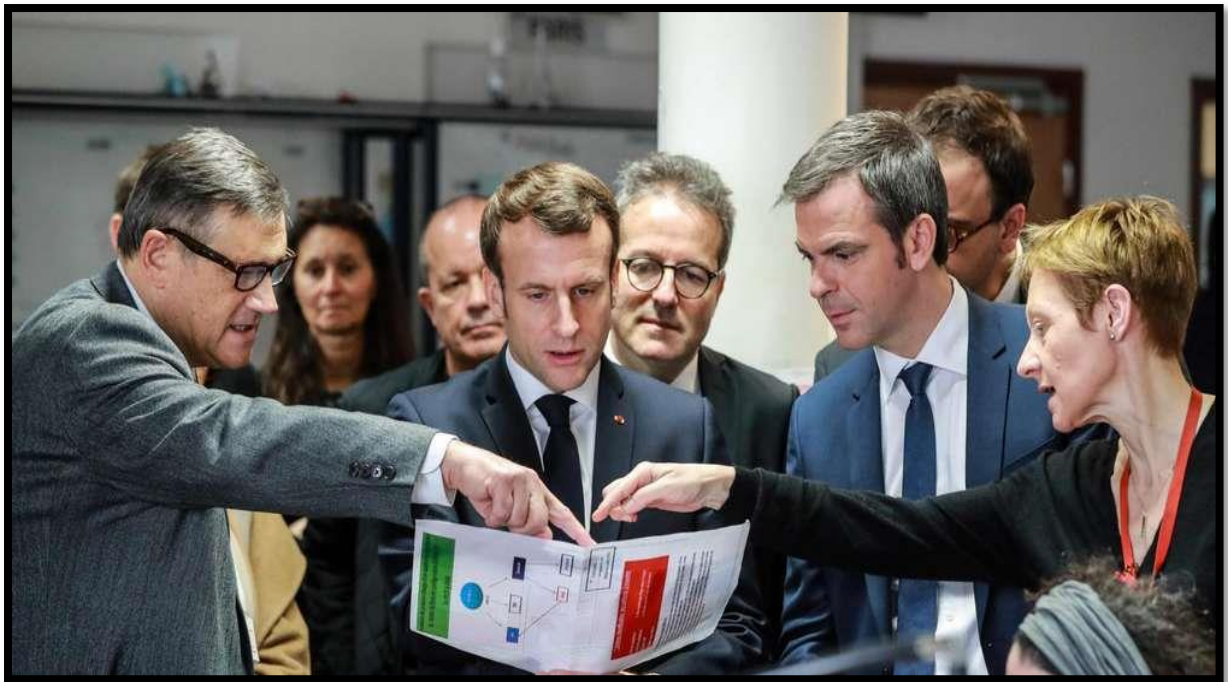
French President Macron, Health Minister Olivier Véran (2nd from right) and others listen to professor Pierre Carli [at left] director of Necker hospital's SAMU-SMUR emergency services March 10 [AFP]

The pandemic-plagued 2020 could be a modern version of the great person theory, which emerged in the 19ᵗʰ century history works around the hypothesis of explaining history by the impact of great men, wise men, or heroes. While delivering a series of six lectures in heroism in May 1840, Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle penned his book "*On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History"*. He noticed, "Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world's history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these (30) ."

As the popular English proverb goes "cometh the hour, cometh the man", it seems pandemics, natural disasters, and other crises pave the way for the right leaders to come to the political hall of fame. Today, the legacy of British prime minister Winston Churchill during World War II amounts to a textbook of leading in havoc. In May 1940, France and Netherlands were under the attacks of the Nazi war machine; and, within weeks, Britain would be standing alone against Adolf Hitler. Churchill could not choose to be Prime Minister at a better time, while facing two crises: a military crisis and a domestic crisis in confidence. Still, he took the challenge by communicating with his nation "with remarkable openness and honesty, winning the respect

of his cabinet and the trust of his people (31) ."

Three days after he took the premiership, Churchill went to the House of Commons in London May 13 to deliver his inspiring, but straightforward, speech: "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat." (32) He told the legislators about the nature of the challenge and prepared the public mood for future sacrifices. It is fascinating to reflect on the passage quoted from his speech, "We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. You ask, what is our policy? I can say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival. Let that be realised; no survival for the British Empire, no survival for all that the British Empire has stood for, no survival for the urge and impulse of the ages, that mankind will move forward towards its goal. But I take up my task with buoyancy and hope. I feel sure that our cause will not be suffered to fail among men. At this time, I feel entitled to claim the aid of all, and I say, "come then, let us go forward together with our united strength (33)."
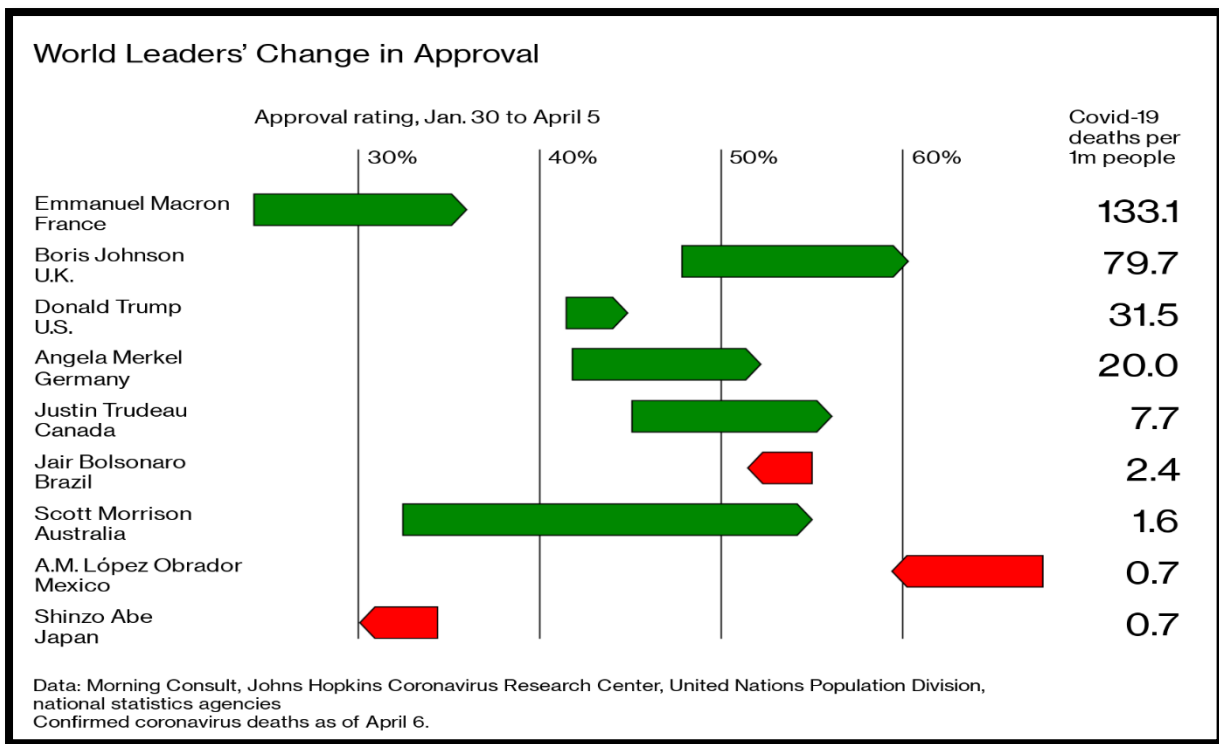
Video:
[PM Winston Churchill delivering his famous speech at the House of Commons May 13 1940](#)

Leadership in crisis can be a mixture of science, history, and art. It derives from the need for being well-informed with data and dynamics, well-enlightened with best practices and matured wisdom among previous leaders in similar challenging times, and well-energized outlook in putting a personal touch on history. Political scientist Arjen Boin has studied the most successful and unsuccessful responses during previous emergencies in his co-authored book "*The Politics of Crisis Management*". He concluded that "effective crisis leadership cannot be brought about by simply doing the right thing' on the ground". Instead, the leaders need to craft a good narrative that helps clarify the problem and unite the population if they are to attain the "permissive consensus" that is essential to be able to make decisions and formulate policies, he wrote. (34) Other leadership experts assert that crisis forces leaders to quickly combat complacency - in themselves and others. So, rally troops, find work, and forge ahead (35).

As mentioned earlier, leadership at times of crises can be 'Judo leadership'. George Bradt differentiates between two types of 'half-full glasses'. He explains, "There are those that focus

on the half-empty part and those that focus on the half-full part. You know whom you're dealing with their initial response to one of your ideas." The half-empty people respond with comments that trigger fight or flight reflexes. They are perceived as challenges at best and attacks at worst: a) "Needs more supporting data."; b) "Your conclusions aren't clear."; and c) "Not sure that will work." In contrast, the half-full people make others feel supported. They lead with comments that open others up to whatever comes next – which should be even more support to redirect their positive momentum: a) "What great research!"; b) "Terrific insights!"; and c) "We can make this work!" (36)

Other strategists have advocated the value of deliberate calm, or the ability to detach from a fraught situation and think clearly about how one will navigate it. (37) They also put the emphasis on bounded optimism, or confidence combined with realism, and warn against the loss of leaders' credibility should they display excessive confidence in spite of obviously difficult conditions. (38) While scrutinizing the performance of a number of leaders during periods of crises, Burkhard Gnarig, project director of the International Civil Society Centre, observed four typical patterns of reactions: 1) Denial as the most widespread approach to crisis management: the leader explains the crisis would away, as President Trump did in early march, or would go to great lengths to show that the crisis will not affect "us"; 2) The "Headless chicken" approach when leaders panic and initiate all kinds of measures, fighting fires (real and imagined ones) wherever they arise. However, they lack a clear understanding of the overall goals they want to achieve and a strategy which turns the different measures into an effective programme; 3) Solid crisis management as a way to steer the organisation in its present shape through the crisis while preserving the status quo as far as possible; and 4) Transformative crisis management as using a crisis to transform your country into something better equipped for the future. The main challenge in transformative crisis management is being prepared. This model follows Churchill's steps in disseminating a new vision and mobilizing the nation (39).

World Leaders' Change in Approval

Approval rating, Jan. 30 to April 5

Leader	Covid-19 deaths per 1m people
Emmanuel Macron, France	133.1
Boris Johnson, U.K.	79.7
Donald Trump, U.S.	31.5
Angela Merkel, Germany	20.0
Justin Trudeau, Canada	7.7
Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil	2.4
Scott Morrison, Australia	1.6
A.M. López Obrador, Mexico	0.7
Shinzo Abe, Japan	0.7

Data: Morning Consult, Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Research Center, United Nations Population Division, national statistics agencies
Confirmed coronavirus deaths as of April 6.

Popularity of world leaders while facing the COVID-19 pandemic [UN Population Division]

Part 2 of the paper will examine how these 'dos' and 'do nots' have emerged over the first three months of the Coronavirus crisis management. It will study how a number of leaders in the United States, Europe, Africa, and Asia have exhibited an unexpected array of decisions and measures; some on target and others have been a game of electioneering if we consider some odd statements of Donald Trump. The list of cases included Italy's prime minister Giuseppe Conte, France's president Emmanuel Macron, Germany's chancellor Angela Merkel, Spain's prime minister Pedro Sánchez, Morocco's king Mohamed VI, Britain's prime minister Boris Johnson, U.S. president Donald Trump, and China's president Xi Jinping.

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