Legitimation and Leadership Communication During Crisis: A Case Study of President Uhuru Kenyatta's Political Speeches on the COVID-19 Pandemic

George Ezekiel Aberi[1] & Nathan Oyori Ogechi[2]

[1] Department of Languages, Linguistics and Literature, Kisii University, Kenya
[2] Office of the Vice Chancellor, Kisii University, Kenya
Correspondence: George Ezekiel Aberi, Department of Languages, Linguistics and Literature, Kisii University, Kenya.

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic harmed millions of Kenyans and created a social and political crisis necessitating interventionist approaches by the government. This article examines the discursive strategies of legitimation embedded in Kenya's public policy initiatives to contain the spread of the Coronavirus pandemic. This article examines the discursive strategies of legitimation in Kenya's public policy initiatives to contain the spread of COVID-19. Using Van Leeuwen's legitimation strategies and Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Approach to Critical Discourse Analysis, this paper examines the legitimation strategies in President Uhuru Kenyatta's speeches on managing COVID-19, as well as the linguistic and rhetorical means through which such strategies were realized in discourse. Drawing on speeches made by Uhuru Kenyatta, this paper demonstrates how engagement strategies are linguistically and rhetorically constituted and fashioned to justify given policy proposals and actions for containing the spread of the Coronavirus. Moreover, the study uncovers how leaders use language to evoke historical memories and legitimize authority.

Keywords: COVID-19, legitimation, policy interventions, rhetoric, critical discourse analysis

1. Introduction

Exploring the relationship between legitimation and leadership communication reveals how social actors validate their actions within institutional frameworks. The discourse surrounding legitimation is not merely rhetorical but encompasses communicative acts reflecting socio-political realities and the need for leaders to uphold official norms. This discussion of legitimation strategies and theoretical frameworks will clarify how these theories inform the legitimation processes employed by leaders during crises like COVID-19.

1.1 Legitimation

Legitimation refers to the process through which social actors endorse or authorize social behavior in institutional contexts where power dynamics play a crucial role (Reyes, 2011). This process becomes significant during crises, necessitating robust justification of actions taken

by leaders (Doskaya, 2002; Van Dijk, 1998).

Van Dijk (1998) suggests that legitimation justifies 'official' actions based on the rights and duties associated with a particular role or position, whether political, social, or legal. Consequently, everyday interactions rarely involve legitimation (Bjorkvall & Hoog, 2019). Legitimation becomes crucial during crises when the legitimacy of the state is challenged (Van Dijk, 1998). For instance, when state officials face accusations of law violations, they resort to 'legitimizing their deeds and actions' (Doskaya, 2002). Van Dijk (1998) emphasizes that legitimation implies that the institutional actor adheres to or claims to uphold official norms. Furthermore, legitimation is 'prototypically political' due to its association with individuals holding public office and exercising power derived from that position (Van Dijk, 1998). Most studies on legitimation focus on 'legitimation of political issues' (Bjorkvall & Hoog, 2019), such as corporate and governmental power structures (Weber, 1968), political campaigns and parties (Chaidas, 2018; Mackay, 2015), and the media's influence on politics (Hart, 2017; Pasitselska, 2017).

Doskaya (2002) characterizes legitimation as a 'speech act of defending oneself.' This often manifests through persuasive discourses, particularly evident in the intentional planning of political speeches to legitimize specific goals (Capone, 2017). However, Martin Rojo and Van Dijk (1997) caution that persuasive discourse alone is insufficient for legitimation. They argue that context is essential for a discourse to fulfil a legitimating function. To be considered legitimate, a discourse must meet three key conditions: (i) its source (speakers, institutions, etc.) must be legitimate, (ii) its representation of events must appear truthful and trustworthy, and (iii) its linguistic and discursive forms must be socially appropriate, authorized, or "politically correct" (Martin Rojo & Van Dijk, 1997).

Martin-Rojo and Van Dijk (1997) propose a three-level framework for analyzing the discursive act of legitimation: pragmatic, semantic, and socio-political; the semantic dimension encompasses the linguistic, semantic, and rhetorical strategies employed by speakers to reinforce and justify their claims. This dimension is closely linked to the pragmatic level, which focuses on the speaker's intended outcomes (Said, 2017; Van Dijk, 1998).

The socio-political dimension emphasizes the social and political contexts that promote the 'pragmatic and semantic aspects of legitimation' (Said, 2017, p. 12). While many studies on legitimation operate at a rhetorical level (Bjorkvall & Hoog, 2019, p. 402), utilizing analytical tools like metaphors, frames (Hart, 2017), narratives (Chaidas, 2018), and lexico-grammatical features (Oddo, 2011), the discursive characteristics of legitimation often receive limited attention. This is despite the fact that legitimation is inherently a 'communicative act' (Doskaya, 2002, p. 74). Recognizing this, Rojo and Van Dijk (1997, pp. 527–528) emphasize the limitations of analyzing legitimation without considering its "linguistic, discursive, communicative, or interactional characteristics." Van Leeuwen (2007, 2008) subsequently developed a methodological framework for analyzing the 'sociological, discursive, and linguistic practice of legitimation,' including a 'detailed analysis of lexico-grammatical realizations of legitimations' (Bjorkvall & Hoog, 2019, p. 402).

Given the nature of political discourse, political speeches warrant attention since 'political leaders justify their political agenda to maintain or alter the direction of a whole nation' (Reyes, 2011). Therefore, while legitimation is a crucial function of discourse, its discursive characteristics have not received sufficient attention from discourse analysts. This highlights the need for further research into the linguistic and communicative aspects of legitimation within leadership communication, particularly in the African context.

1.2 Strategies of Legitimation

Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 105) notes that the legitimation of social practices answers questions like, 'Why should we do this?' or 'Why should we do it this way? He identifies four main legitimation strategies: authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis. These can be used individually or in combination to legitimize political actions or policy decisions.

These can be used individually or in combination to legitimize or delegitimize political actions or policy decisions.

Table 1. Categories of legitimation

Categories	Sub-categorization
Authorization	Personal authority, impersonal authority, tradition, conformity, expert authority, role model authority
Moral Evaluation	Evaluation, abstraction, analogies, comparison
Rationalization	Instrumental rationalization, theoretical rationalization
Mythopoesis	Moral tales, cautionary tales

Adopted from Van Leeuwen (2007).

Authorization involves legitimizing actions through references to authority, including tradition, laws (impersonal authority), personal authority, expert authority (citing specialists) (Rivers & Ross, 2020, p. 5), role model authority, and conformity authorization based on widespread acceptance (Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999, p. 105).

Moral evaluation is achieved through references to value systems linked to specific 'discourses of moral values' (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 109). These discourses imply that certain actions or policies are 'just' within the legal or political system (Van Dijk, 1998). Moral evaluation is indicated by evaluative adjectives (e.g., useful, good, bad) and through analogies and abstractions that connect practices to moral discourses (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 111).

Rationalization refers to the goals and uses of institutionalized social actions, along with the knowledge that society constructs to validate them (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 91). This type of legitimation justifies decisions based on their goals, uses, and effects (Van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 91). It can involve referencing social practices and expert knowledge. Rationalization includes: (1) *Instrumental rationality*, which legitimizes actions by linking them to their goals and effects (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 113); and (2) *theoretical rationality*, which legitimizes practices through expertise and predictions about the natural order (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 113-116). This form can also include definitions and explanations of habitual activities (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 116). Reyes (2011, p. 876) notes that this legitimation is expressed through phrases like "After consultations with..." or verbs indicating mental processes, such as "explore" and "consult." Importantly, this type of legitimation derives its moral logic from commonly accepted moral values that promote "mass loyalty" (Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999, p. 106).

Mythopoesis involves legitimation through storytelling, including cautionary tales that illustrate the consequences of deviating from social norms and moral tales that reward adherence to legitimate practices (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 117-118). As Said (2017, p. 20) states, "mythopoesis is enacted whenever narratives are utilized to legitimize actions," highlighting potential outcomes of complying with or ignoring expectations.

These strategies are often interwoven within texts, and speakers typically employ various strategies to achieve their goals. This paper aims to enhance understanding of leadership during the coronavirus pandemic by examining the discursive processes through which Kenyatta asserts his leadership claims and how these claims are justified across different texts related to the pandemic's spread and control.

2. Leadership Communication

In examining the legitimation strategies used by Uhuru Kenyatta during the COVID-19 pandemic, various theories of leadership communication provide valuable frameworks. This section reviews the literature on key theories of leadership communication, highlighting their key arguments, relevance, and limitations in understanding presidential political discourse. The study draws insights from five theories: Charismatic Leadership Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Servant Leadership Communication Theory, and Social Identity Theory (SIT), highlighting the complexities of legitimation and public communication during crises.

Charismatic Leadership Theory, articulated by House (1976), posits that certain leaders have an

innate ability to inspire and engage followers through unique personality traits and communication styles. Charismatic leadership stems from the personal qualities and extraordinary capabilities of individual leaders, eliciting strong emotional reactions and loyalty. These leaders are characterized by their vision, desire to influence, exceptional communication skills, self-confidence, and personal sacrifice (Walker & Aritz, 2014; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). In crises, charismatic leaders foster collective identity and purpose, alleviating public fear and encouraging compliance with directives (Gichuki, Karanja & Atikiya, 2024; Goleman, 1995). However, the theory's focus on charismatic leaders can lead to authoritarian tendencies, undermining governance checks and balances (Lepsius, 2014). The sustainability of such leadership is also questionable, as it relies heavily on personal relationships that may falter without sustained charisma (Conger & Kanungo, 1998). Furthermore, charismatic leaders' persuasive language can sometimes be viewed as deceptive (Walker & Aritz, 2014).

Transformational Leadership Theory, introduced by James MacGregor Burns (1978), emphasizes leaders' roles in inspiring and motivating followers through compelling visions. Burns argues that true leadership is closely connected to the followers' needs, distinguishing between transactional leadership, based on exchanges, and transformational leadership, which fosters deeper engagement and enhances morale (Walker & Aritz, 2014). Transformational leaders are seen as role models who build trust and respect, especially during crises when followers seek guidance (Northouse, 2025). The theory emphasizes four key tenets: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, contributing to a collaborative environment conducive to innovation and effective crisis response (Bass & Avolio, 1993). However, this style may create dependency on charismatic figures, thereby hindering individual agency among followers (Yukl, 1999).

Situational Leadership Theory, developed by Hersey and Blanchard in 1969, asserts that no single leadership style is best; effective leadership depends on context and situational demands. According to this theory, therefore, leaders ought to adapt their communication styles to meet the changing needs of their team members, emphasizing two key dimensions:

directive and supportive behaviors (Walker & Aritz, 2014). This flexibility is vital during crises, although it raises concerns about messaging consistency and its effects on public trust (Graeff, 1983). Furthermore, critics argue that situational leadership may oversimplify complex interactions by rigidly categorizing styles and maturity levels, thereby overlooking organizational culture and external influences. (Brown & Barker, 2001) Nonetheless, its focus on adaptability and responsive communication resonates well in crises.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) provides insights into leadership communication by emphasizing that individuals derive a significant portion of their self-concept from group memberships. This theory highlights social categorization, identification, and comparison, influencing perceptions and behaviors during crises (Tajfel & Turner, 1985; Litzenberg, 2024). Leaders often invoke social identities to foster unity and instill confidence, legitimizing their authority and rallying support (Haslam, 2004). However, critics contend that SIT may oversimplify group dynamics by focusing predominantly on categorization while neglecting intersectional factors such as class, gender, and ethnicity (Postmes & Brunsting, 2002). In contexts like Kenya, where ethnic identities can be divisive, it is crucial to consider the complexities arising from multiple and often conflicting identities.

Servant Leadership Communication Theory, stemming from Robert K. Greenleaf's essay "The Servant as Leader" (1970), posits that a leader's primary role is to serve others by prioritizing their needs. This approach emphasizes empathetic communication, active listening, and community building. Greenleaf (1977) identifies four key tenets for leaders: active listening, empathy, stewardship, and prioritizing followers. This promotes a collaborative and inclusive environment, encouraging open communication and growth among team members (Daniels, 2021; Gotsis & Grimani, 2016). However, while this theory promotes a collaborative and inclusive environment, it may lack sufficient focus on the leader's authority and decision-making efficacy, potentially leading to indecision or lack of direction during crises (Peterlin, Pearse & Dimovski, 2015).

In the context of the phenomenon under investigation, the theories of leadership communication above offer valuable insights into the dynamics of legitimation during crises.

That is, though these theories provide a robust framework for analyzing leadership communication, their application in African contexts, particularly in this study, has not been sufficiently explored, i.e., to unravel of local complexities, power dynamics, cultural diversity, and historical legacies that underpin their use in varied contexts.

3. Research Methodology

This study is grounded in Fairclough's three-tier approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which encompasses textual analysis focusing on linguistic features, discursive practice examining the production and consumption of texts, and social practice that investigates the broader socio-political context of discourse (Fairclough, 1992; 1995; 2020). Utilizing strategies of legitimation from Van Leeuwen (2007; 2008), Rojo and Van Dijk (1997), and Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999), the article analyzes the discursive techniques employed in Kenyatta's speeches regarding COVID-19, along with the linguistic and rhetorical tactics that support these strategies. In this respect, four categories were identified i.e., authorization, mythopoesis, moralization, and rationalization, which leaders employ to justify their policy decisions and to woo the public. Data for the study were gathered from 6 speeches delivered between March 2020 and November 2021, to ensure accuracy and authenticity. This was taken to constitute a sufficiently comprehensive corpus for the study. Notice that the study exclusively focuses on Uhuru Kenyatta's speeches, which limits the capture of the broader public discourse surrounding COVID-19 in Kenya. Furthermore, the analysis is confined to speeches delivered during the pandemic, thus overlooking shifts in discourse before or after the crisis. Efforts were made to ensure that all quotes from public speeches were accurately attributed and contextualized. The researcher also remained conscious of personal biases and aimed for objectivity in the analysis, owing to the subjective nature of interpreting political discourse.

4. Key Findings

This study reveals several critical strategies employed by the speaker to legitimize his leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic, rooted in Van Leeuwen's (2007; 2008) frameworks of legitimation. Firstly, the use of tradition as a legitimating strategy is prominent, with the speaker invoking collective historical resilience to foster a sense of stability and continuity. For instance, statements like "Our Nation has always overcome and emerged from seemingly insurmountable challenges stronger and better" underscore the importance of historical memory in reinforcing national identity and mobilizing public sentiment towards cooperative action (see section 5.1) Secondly, the study noted the speaker's invocation of personal authority to enhance the legitimacy of his directives, as seen in his use of authoritative language, such as "I, as your President, ORDER and DIRECT…" (See section 5.2). This was found to be focused on establishing a clear chain of command, and compelling adherence to the government's policy regulations. This reliance on personal authority was found to pose concerns about inclusivity and democratic engagement in leadership communication during crises.

Moreover, aside from the utilization of instrumental rationalization aimed at linking governmental actions to tangible outcomes, (see section 5.5), the study highlights the significance of moral evaluations and emotional appeals in shaping public perception. In this context, the framing of the pandemic as a moral crisis was noted to be aimed at necessitating collective action, with the speaker emphasizing shared responsibility through statements like "Wearing your mask and washing your hands will save lives" (Uhuru, 202C) (See sections 5.3-5.6). This not only reinforces the urgency of compliance but also connects individual actions to the collective well-being of society (Reyes, 2011). In the same vein, the use of cautionary tales, such as the narrative about a young man who disregarded health guidelines, serves to illustrate the social repercussions of non-compliance and reinforces the need for adherence to public health measures (Van Leeuwen, 2008). Ultimately, these findings underscore the complexities of leadership communication during crises, highlighting the necessity for a more nuanced approach that balances authority with inclusivity and moral responsibility.

5. Discussions

This section discusses how the speaker uses various strategies of legitimation (i.e., appeals to tradition, personal authority, moral evaluations, emotional appeals, and mythopoesis — Van Leeuwen 2007; 2008) during the COVID-19

pandemic to shape public perceptions, mobilize collective action, reinforce authority and compliance to health directives. This includes an exploration of the nuances of particular communication strategies utilized and their implications for understanding leadership in the face of a national crisis.

5.1 Legitimation Through Appeals to Tradition

According to Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 20), legitimation can be achieved through appeals to tradition, and is usually realised by invoking keywords such as "tradition," "practice," "custom," and "habit,"; it rests on the premise "because this is what we always do" or "because this is what we have always done." The use of tradition as a strategy for legitimation is illustrated through the excerpts below:

1) Our Nation has always overcome and emerged from seemingly insurmountable challenges stronger and better. (Uhruhu, 2020A)

2) Every time, we have been faced with adversity Kenyans have coalesced together and pulled each other out of the situation. (Uhruhu, 2020A)

In excerpts 1 and 2 above, the speaker's statements — "Our Nation has always overcome and emerged from seemingly insurmountable challenges stronger and better" and "Every time we have been faced with adversity Kenyans have coalesced together and pulled each other out of the situation" illustrate a strategic reliance on historical resilience and unity. By invoking these themes, the speaker establishes continuity and stability, suggesting that Kenya's past successes can guide current efforts to navigate the pandemic (Uhuru, 2020A). In this context, the speaker deliberately uses historical references (authority of tradition) to underscore the strength of Kenyan society. The categorical assertion that "Our Nation has always overcome" not only highlights a collective memory of resilience (Moore, Metcalf & Metcalf, 2023) but also positions the current government's actions within a framework of historical legitimacy. According to Van Leeuwen (2008), this approach serves to legitimize present actions by aligning them with past successes, thereby reinforcing national identity and fostering a sense of hope among citizens. Moreover, the emphasis on collective identity in the second statement, where the speaker notes that "Kenyans have coalesced together," serves

to mobilize public sentiments towards cooperative action. This aligns with Fairclough's (1995) view that language shapes social identities. From the standpoint of the social identity theory, the speaker's invocation of a collective Kenyan identity can be said to be tailored to foster unity and instill confidence, thus legitimizing his authority and rallying support for government initiatives.

Ideologically, invoking the authority of tradition suggests that established norms and values guide societal responses to challenges. That is, through manifest intertextuality (Fairclough, 2003; 2020) the speaker situates his leadership within the invoked historical continuum. This rhetorical strategy helps him to align himself with previous leaders who have successfully navigated crises, thereby reinforcing his authority. In terms of leadership communication, this rhetorical motif is tailored to rally public support for government initiatives against COVID-19, hence fostering compliance with health measures by emphasizing shared history and collective action. In effect, the invocation of tradition not only serves to legitimize current governmental actions but also reinforces existing power structures, where authority is derived from historical successes rather than contemporary democratic accountability (Van Leeuwen, 2008). However, this reliance on tradition can lead to an uncritical acceptance of governmental authority based on past achievements, potentially stifling critical engagement with current policies.

5.2 Legitimation Through Personal Authority

Drawing on his authority as the president of Kenya vested with "institutional authority" (Van Leeuwen 2008, p. 105) to govern/lead, the speaker could be said to be speaking from an authoritative position as the head of government to legitimize his claim:

3) *I, as your President, ORDER and DIRECT…* that all Ministries and Departments shall cause the payment of at least of Ksh. 13 Billion of the *verified pending bills.* (Uhuru, 2020A)

4) *I hereby order and direct* that all State and Public Officers with pre-existing medical conditions and/or aged 58 years and above… take leave or forthwith work from home. (Uhuru, 2020A)

5) *I further direct* the Ministry of Health, the

County Governments and the Public Service Commission to *expedite the recruitment process*. (Uhuru, 2020A)

In relation to authority and legitimacy, the phrase "I, as your President" (extract 3) invokes personal authority, thereby positioning the speaker as the legitimate leader with the power to issue directives. This assertion establishes a clear chain of command, reinforcing the expectation that the directive ought to be followed; it implies that the action is not merely permissible but obligatory within the framework of governance. It is in this sense that Van Leeuwen (2008) emphasizes that personal authority is crucial in leadership discourse, as it cultivates a sense of trust and expectation among the populace. In this context, the use of the words "ORDER" and "DIRECT" (extract 3) references the regulatory authority vested upon the presidency, which communicates the idea that adherence to his directive is a requirement rather than a choice. The authoritative tone employed here reinforces the necessity of compliance, framing it as an obligation rather than a suggestion. That is, the directives imply conformity authorization (Van Leeuwen, 2007; 2008), indicating that this action is consistent with broader governmental practices and expectations. This aligns with Fairclough's (2003) notion of legitimation, where authority is derived from established institutional norms. In the same vein, the sentiments expressed in excerpts 4 and 5 above highlight the speaker's authoritative position as president through phrases like "I hereby order and direct…" and "I further direct," which position him as a leader with the power and authority to issue directives that are expected to be followed without question (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 46; Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999, p. 96). By asserting his role as a recognized leader, the speaker enhances the legitimacy of his commands, reinforcing their basis in institutional authority, particularly when addressing "State and Public Officers" (see extract 4). This context situates the directives within the framework of institutional governance, thereby affirming their legitimacy and the expectation of compliance (Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999, p. 96). Besides, the manifest intertextual references (Fairclough, 1995; 2020) to institutions like the Ministry of Health and the Public Service Commission (excerpt 5) further serve to legitimize the directive within established governmental

operations, aligning it with the responsibilities of these institutions. What is more, this connection not only bolsters the credibility of the directive but also underscores its significance in the governance structure. This is in line with Dibattista (2006) and Kostova (2020), who posit that such intertextual references to institutional structures are integral to broader strategies of authority legitimation.

From the Perspective of Leadership Communication, the use of personal authority, as highlighted in the phrase "I, as your President ORDER and DIRECT," (excerpt 3) is a powerful rhetorical strategy that reinforces the speaker's position as the legitimate leader who embraces servant leadership. This approach aligns with the principles of transformational leadership, which emphasize the importance of a leader's ability to inspire trust and commitment among followers (Bass & Riggio, 2006). However, while the invocation of personal authority can enhance legitimacy, it may also raise concerns regarding authoritarianism in leadership communication. That is, the commanding language—such as "ORDER" and "DIRECT" — can be perceived as top-down communication that limits dialogue and participation from stakeholders. Effective leadership communication ought both to assert authority and foster an inclusive environment where diverse perspectives are valued. Moreover, the reliance on conformity authorization, as described by Van Leeuwen (2007, 2008), while effective in establishing a chain of command, may inadvertently stifle critical discourse. This means that leadership communication needs to ideally balance authority with openness to feedback and discussion, as this promotes a culture of trust and collaboration (Edmondson & Levy, 2019).

5.3 Legitimation Through Moral Evaluation

The call to "expedite the recruitment process" (extract 3) carries a moral evaluation, implying a responsibility to act swiftly and efficiently. According to Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 109, p. 111), moral evaluation involves justifying actions and decisions through evaluative language, and is usually achieved through the use of evaluative adjectives, analogies that seek to legitimate particular actions by means of comparisons, and abstractions anchoring actions in moral discourses. In this respect, the implied urgency above suggests that any delays in recruitment could be seen as neglectful or harmful, aligning the action with societal values of accountability

and responsiveness in governance (Edmondson & Levy, 2019). Implicitly, the statement evokes the values associated with public service, particularly the necessity for adequate staffing in health services, which is critical for ensuring public welfare (Van Leeuwen, 2007). Moreover, the directives above also carry a moral evaluation, implying a moral obligation on the part of the government to pay the pending bills, failure to which will be considered unfair or unjust, in line with the societal values of fairness and responsibility. This is better exemplified by the use of the proposition "verified pending bills" in extract 3, thus reinforcing the moral obligation and accompanying expectation that financial commitments ought to be honoured by the government. Other examples of the use of moral evaluation as a legitimation strategy in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic are better elucidated in the ensuing discussion.

6) Choices are nothing without leadership. I say so because when COVID-19 hit our country, My Administration found itself confronted with *a Dilemma of Two Rights*. Opinion was, divided on, whether to lockdown the country or to leave it open. What made the difference was leadership. One side of the divide presented an economic argument. They wanted us to leave the country "open" and save the economy. They argued that COVID was a health crisis that should not trump economic imperatives. The other side of the divide made a compelling health argument against *the economic argument*. Led by a *brain trust of medical scientists and researchers*, they argued that the country had no option but to lockdown. Their models pointed to a soaring crisis if drastic choices, were not made. *After much reflection*, My Administration opted for the *public health argument* over the economic argument. Our rationale was that we can always *revive an ailing economy*; but we *cannot bring to life those who die from COVID-19* (Uhuru, 2020H).

7) The COVID-19 Pandemic has led to an *unprecedented loss of life*, global economic slow-down; the postponement of major cultural, religious, political, and sporting events including the 2020 Olympic Games (Uhuru, 2020G).

8) The most effective way to limit the spread of the virus is through basic changes in individual behaviour and hygiene (Uhuru, 2020A).

The framing of the situation as a "Dilemma of Two Rights" (extract 4) above presents a moral complexity, suggesting that the Kenyan Government faced a tough ethical choice. That is, the framing of the situation as a "Dilemma of Two Rights" (extract 6) underscores the moral complexity of decision-making during a crisis, thereby legitimizing the government's choice by portraying it as a responsible and thoughtful consideration of competing values. This tactic serves to legitimize the decision by portraying it as a responsible and thoughtful consideration of competing values. Similarly, the proposition, "*we can always revive an ailing economy*; but *we cannot bring to life those who die from COVID-19* (extract 4) acts as a *strong moral justification for prioritizing health*, hence reinforcing the ethical considerations behind the decision. In this context, the government's invocation of "*a brain trust of medical scientists and researchers*," helps to justify its policy choices as being anchored in credible authorities (expert authority) that prioritize public health over economic proposals. Furthermore, by presenting the government as being able to make a rational judgment after evaluating both sides of the debate (economic vs. health), the speaker seeks to position himself as a decisive leader, and one who is capable of making balanced decisions during a crisis. This understanding is brought to the fore by the strategic use of the phrase "*after much reflection*," which helps to legitimize the chosen course of action underlying his leadership's decision-making process in response to the coronavirus pandemic. What is more, the speaker's acknowledgement of differing perspectives enhances the legitimacy of his leadership by portraying it as inclusive and considerate of various viewpoints.

The fact that the speaker does not completely dismiss the economic argument (i.e., by stating that, "we did not dismiss the economic argument in toto)" has implications for leadership communication. That is, this concession serves to enhance the legitimacy of the speaker's mode of leadership, by portraying it as one that takes into account divergent perspectives before arriving at particular policy decisions.

In excerpt 5 above, the use of the evaluative proposition "*unprecedented loss of life*" serves to convey the severity of the pandemic. That is, the

term "unprecedented" not only highlights the magnitude of the crisis, but also calls for a moral response, suggesting that the loss is not just statistical but deeply tragic. In effect, this mode of framing helps to legitimize the urgency of the response by emphasizing the need to act against such a dire situation. In this context, the mention of the *"global economic slow-down" and the "postponement of major cultural, religious, political, and sporting events"* in the same excerpt serves to situate the pandemic within a broad moral framework, thereby implying that the pandemic does not only affect our health, but also the very fabric of society, including cultural and communal aspects. By invoking these elements, the speaker underscores the moral imperative to respond decisively to protect lives and maintain societal cohesion. What is more, the abstract nature of terms like "*loss of life*" and "*global economic slow-down*" in allows for a moral interpretation that transcends individual experiences. This abstraction invokes a discourse of moral values that emphasizes the importance of protecting life and community well-being. It elevates the discussion from merely describing the situation to framing it as a moral crisis that requires collective action.

In the same vein, the argument, "*The most effective way to limit the spread of the virus is through basic changes in individual behaviour and hygiene,*" (excerpt 6) embeds a moral evaluation of personal responsibility, signaled through the use of the evaluative adjective "most" in the term "most effective," thus implying a normative judgment, supporting the need to adopt the prescribed health practices/protocols as the morally advisable and necessary option. Similarly, the reference to "*basic changes* in excerpt 6 above" suggests that the prescribed actions are essential and straightforward, as moral obligations. In this case, by stressing hygiene as a fundamental practice, the speaker can be said to want to legitimize the need for citizens to engage in these behaviours for the greater good, thereby linking personal responsibility to collective health outcomes. Furthermore, the call for "basic changes" can be said to be abstracting specific actions, thereby transforming them into moral duties. In effect, this abstraction allows the speaker to moralize the aforementioned practices by associating them with values such as health, safety, and community well-being- which elevates the discussion from mere recommendations to a

moral discourse on responsibility and care for others. This moral framing serves to enhance the legitimacy of governmental actions by aligning them with the ethical expectations of the populace. Moreover, the understanding herein coheres with Van Leeuwen's (2008) emphasis that moral evaluation is often realized in text and talk by use of evaluation, analogies that seek to legitimate particular actions through comparisons, or through "abstraction," which involves invoking practices (or their component parts) in abstract ways for purposes of moralizing them.

5.4 Legitimation Through Emotional Appeals

Reyes (2011) emphasizes that emotions play a crucial role in legitimizing political discourse. That is, political actors often incorporate terms such as fear, destruction, and death into their rhetoric as a strategy to legitimize their actions or decisions through evoking anxiety and fear among the public. In this respect, Khajavi and Rasti (2020, p. 11) highlight the ability of emotions to mobilize the public, prompting them into action. The use of emotional appeals can effectively resonate with the audience's fears and anxieties, legitimizing the government's response to the crisis. For instance, the speaker justifies the danger of the Coronavirus by invoking words that spell destruction and death attributed to the pandemic:

9) "Lakini wesangu, na mimi *sitaki niwadanganye* wale ambao wamekata kuona huu ugonjwa kama ni kitu cha kweli. Nataka tu mwangalie *makaburi* ambayo imechimbwa duniani, msima *kushika maiti za watu*" ("But my friends, I do not want to deceive those who have refused to see this disease as something real. I just want you to look at the graves that have been dug all over the world to bury the dead") (Uhuru, 2020E).

As evidenced in extract 9 above, the speaker uses emotional appeals as a legitimation strategy. For instance, the phrase "Lakini wesangu" (But my friends) in the first line of the extract serves to establish a personal connection with the audience, thereby setting a tone of urgency and intimacy. Similarly, the speaker's declaration, "sitaki niwadanganye" (I do not want to deceive you), in the same line invokes sincerity and trust, hence positioning the speaker as a truthful person in the face of skepticism. In this context, the evocation of

death through the references to "makaburi" (graves) and *kushika maiti* za *watu* (to bury the dead) is a stark reminder of mortality, hence a strong emotional appeal that not only instills fear, but also compels the audience to acknowledge the seriousness of the disease, thereby increasing the urgency of compliance. The mentioning of graves and implied deaths seeks to instil a sense of fear regarding the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, thereby pushing the audience to reconsider their stance. This explains why the speaker directly addresses those who "have refused to see this disease as something real," hence confronting their denial of the same. Besides, in view of the above said, it is arguable that the speaker justifies the danger of the Coronavirus by invoking words that spell destruction and death attributed to the Coronavirus pandemic (Khajavi & Rasti, 2020, p. 9), thereby evoking fear in his audience about the possible consequences of not adhering to the prescribed health protocols. The rampant use of emotions as a legitimation strategy (Reyes, 2011) is further exemplified in the extracts below:

10) I share the *heavy hearts* of all the faithful who can no longer congregate and share in worship of The Almighty (Uhuru, 2020F).

11) As a parent and a grandparent, I share in the *pain and frustration* of most parents in having our children home for nearly an entire year (Uhuru, 2020G, pp. 19-20).

12) *I recognize the anxiety* that this pandemic has caused millions of Kenyan families; *fearful* of *what the future may hold* for them and their children.

13) We condole with the families and friends of the 6 that we have *regrettably lost to the pandemic* (Uhuru 2020C).

14) *Our hearts go out* to the *families who have lost loved ones* to Coronavirus (Uhuru, 2020G).

15) *As* a *caring, responsive Government*, and to cushion all Kenyan households against the economic shocks triggered by the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic, we continue to progressively roll out targeted measures to sustain livelihood (Uhuru, 2020F).

At the textual level, the choices and use of lexical terms such as "heavy hearts," (excerpt 10), "pain and frustration," (excerpt 11) "fearful of what the future may holds," (excerpt 12), "condole

with the families and friends" (excerpt 13), "families who have lost loved ones," (excerpt 14), and caring and responsive Government (Extracts 15), are laden with emotional weight. These lexical choices are not only tailored to convey empathy but also serve to align the speaker with the audience's sentiments, fostering a sense of shared experience- amidst widespread fear and uncertainty surrounding the pandemic that makes the public more receptive to messages that resonate with their emotional state. This aligns with Reyes (2011) view that emotions, particularly fear, can be powerful tools for legitimating claims and motivating action, in which case, fear can prompt individuals to confront uncomfortable realities and catalyze collective responses. From the perspective of the servant leadership theory, by expressing empathy towards families affected by the pandemic, the speaker can be said to embody the servant leader's commitment to serving the community. This approach not only builds trust but also validates the government's actions as prioritizing the welfare of the citizens, thereby emphasizing the idea that true leadership is essentially about serving the community.

5.5 Instrumental Rationalization

Instrumental rationalization (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 113) involves the legitimation of political actions or decisions by refereeing to the goals, *purposes/uses/usefulness or effects of institutionalized social actions/practices*, including clarifying why such actions or practices "take the forms they do:" This understanding is better illustrated in the following discussion.

16) In order to protect jobs for our people and to provide some certainty for both employees and their employers, I, as your President, ORDER and DIRECT… The National Treasury shall cause an immediate reduction of the VAT from 16% to 14%, effective 1st April (2020A, p. 8).

17) The lowering of the Cash Reserve Ratio (CRR) to 4.25 percent from 5.25 percent will provide additional liquidity of Ksh. 35 Billion to commercial banks to directly support borrowers who are distressed as a result of the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Uhuru, 2020A, p. 19).

18) Wearing your mask and washing your hands will save lives (Uhuru, 2020C).

The decision to reduce the VAT from 16% to 14%

reflects a strategic move by the government to protect jobs and provide economic certainty, exemplifying instrumental rationality. This exemplifies instrumental rationality, where the justification for reducing VAT stems from its anticipated outcomes, such as enhanced job security and overall economic stability (Uhuru, 2020A, p. 8). The speaker's directive employs logical discourse that ties fiscal policy directly to socio-economic objectives, portraying this tax reduction as a pragmatic solution to urgent economic challenges. From Wodak's (2015) theory of argumentation, the authoritative tone conveyed through phrases like "ORDER and DIRECT" underscores the decisive nature of the action, enhancing its perceived legitimacy as a necessary response to the socio-economic crisis intensified by the pandemic. That is, by positioning this fiscal adjustment as a preventative measure against potential financial collapse, the statement effectively reinforces the legitimacy of government intervention. The same understanding is conveyed through the reduction of the Cash Reserve Ratio (CRR) (excerpt 17), which is another instance of instrumental rationality aiming to inject Ksh. 35 billion into the economy to assist distressed borrowers and address the financial difficulties arising from the COVID-19 pandemic (Uhuru, 2020A).

In the same vein, excerpt 18 "Wearing your mask and washing your hands will save lives" presents a factual claim that wearing masks and practicing hand hygiene are effective measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. In this context, the speaker's reliance on scientific evidence (public health protocols) lends credibility to the message, thereby making it a rational argument. In other words, the statement suggests that adherence to the aforesaid measures is a rational choice for individuals who care about the well-being of themselves and others. What is more, the mention of "saving lives" taps into fear and concern for loved ones, enhancing the persuasive power of the message through emotional appeals. By positioning this fiscal adjustment as a preventative measure against potential financial collapse, the statement effectively reinforces the legitimacy of government intervention.

5.6 Mythopoesis in the Service of Legitimation

In line with Van Leeuwen's (2008) concept of Mythopoesis (a type of legitimation achieved by means of storytelling and the use of *Cautionary tales*), each of the excerpts below serves to construct a narrative that legitimizes the actions and leadership of President Kenyatta during the pandemic:

19) Globally, over 400,000 cases of the virus have been reported. Yesterday, Kenya had 25 confirmed cases of the Coronavirus. Today, we have received confirmation of an additional 3 new cases (Uhuru, 2020A).

20) Here in Kenya, it has been 12 days since our first confirmed case of Coronavirus (Uhuru, 2020A).

21) The World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30th January 2020, and a Pandemic on 11th March 2020 (Uhuru 2020G).

22) On 25th March 2020, I announced State interventions to cushion Kenyans against adverse economic effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic (Uhuru, 2020G).

23) Kenya's first case of COVID-19 was confirmed on 13th March 2020 (Uhuru, 2020G).

In extract 19- "Globally, over 400,000 cases of the virus have been reported. Yesterday, Kenya had 25 confirmed cases of the Coronavirus. Today, we have received confirmation of an additional 3 new cases…," for instance, the speaker utilizes factual data to establish a sense of urgency and gravity surrounding the pandemic. Moreover, the numerical data acts as a form of legitimation by providing an empirical basis for the need for compliance, framing the pandemic as a grave threat that requires collective action. In the same vein, by referencing global statistics alongside national figures, Kenyatta situates Kenya within a broader context of a global crisis, thereby legitimizing the government's response. This mode of framing aligns with Wodak's (2015; 2018) concepts of history and numbers, where historical and numerical data are used strategically to legitimize the government's response to the Coronavirus pandemic. From Van Leeuwen's (2008) perspective of legitimation through narrative/mythopoesis, the presentation of increasing case numbers of people falling victim to the coronavirus functions as a cautionary tale, meant to warn citizens of the potential for rapid increases in cases, if norms around health practices are not observed. According to Van Leeuwen (2008), such a

narrative can be said to illustrate the consequences of "deviant activities," which in this context would refer to ignoring health guidelines. This understanding is heightened further in excerpt 20: "Here in Kenya, it has been 12 days since our first confirmed case of Coronavirus," where the reference to time emphasizes the immediacy of the situation and the need for vigilance. That is, the framing of the timeline above serves to remind Kenyans of the pandemic's progression, reinforcing the narrative that collective swift action is necessary to mitigate its impact. This approach coheres with Fairclough's (1995) notion of historicity, as it situates the current events within a specific historical context, reinforcing the idea that the government has a moral obligation to respond decisively. In other words, the use of *mythopoesis* here can be said to suggest the idea that time is of the essence, invoking a sense of responsibility among citizens to adhere to public health measures. The same understanding is demonstrated in excerpt 5: "Kenya's first case of COVID-19 was confirmed on 13th March 2020," where the announcement of the first confirmed case serves as a pivotal moment in the narrative of the pandemic in Kenya. In this context, by pinpointing this date, the speaker not only constructs a historical marker that signifies the beginning of a national crisis, but also legitimizes subsequent actions taken by the government, as necessary responses to a clearly defined threat.

From a rhetorical standpoint, Kenyatta references authoritative sources: "The World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30th January 2020, and a Pandemic on 11th March 2020" (excerpt 3) to legitimize the seriousness of the COVID-19 crisis. In this respect, he invokes the World Health Organization (a globally recognized institution) probably to reinforce his narrative. In effect, this use of external validation serves to construct a narrative that frames the pandemic as a universally acknowledged threat, thereby legitimizing the government's response as part of a broader international effort. Furthermore, this alignment with authoritative global bodies serves to enhance the credibility of his narrative, by suggesting that the Kenyan government is responding appropriately to a recognized threat.

In the same vein, Kenyatta presents a narrative of proactive leadership in response to the pandemic's economic impact. That is, by specifying the date of the announcement "25th March 2020," (see excerpt 4), he creates a sense of accountability and transparency, thereby reinforcing the idea that the government is taking decisive action. From the perspective of Van Leeuwen's (2008) concept of mythopoesis, the use of the narrative here suggests that the government's interventions are not only necessary but also morally justified as a means of protecting citizens. Moreover, the framing of state interventions as a protective measure can be said to be tailored to encourage citizens to view the government as a legitimate authority acting in their best interests during a crisis.

Besides, the announcement of state interventions to cushion Kenyans against economic effects (excerpt 4) acts as a moral tale by positioning the government as a protector of the people, reinforcing the idea that engaging in legitimate social practices—such as adhering to health regulations—will lead to positive outcomes for individuals and society as a whole. This narrative of protection and intervention serves to justify the government's actions and encourages public support.

5.6.1 Cautionary Tales

As mentioned above, *Cautionary tales are part of Van* Leeuwen's (2008) concept of Mythopoesis (a type of legitimation achieved by means of storytelling or the use of narratives to explain what may happen if an individual fails to observe given norms of social practices, as in indulging oneself in "deviant activities that lead to unhappy endings," (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 117-118). A good example of a cautionary tale is manifested during the President Uhuru Kenyatta's 6th televised speech in Swahili to Kenyans about the status of the Corona Virus Pandemic:

24) "Nataka niwaeleze kuhusu kijana mmoja kwa sababu yeye alikuwa amejiona kwamba ameshinda askari, ameponyoka, amepita road blocks, ametoka Mombasa, ameenda mpaka Kathiani, Machakos, na anajipigia makofi ya vile amefaulu. Kufika Kathiani pahali ambapo huo ugonjwa haukuwa umesikika, ameambukiza dadake. Na hatujui ni watu wangapi huku Kathiani ambao sasa dadake naye pia ameambukiza. Kujipenda kuliko kupenda wale ambao wakupenda. Huu ugonjwa ni hatari." ("I want to tell you about a young

man because he believed he had defeated the police, escaped, passed through roadblocks, left Mombasa, went all the way to Kathiani, Machakos, and is applauding himself for how he succeeded. Upon reaching Kathiani, a place where the disease had not been heard of, he infected his sister. And we do not know how many people here in Kathiani who now his sister has also been infected. Loving oneself more than loving those who love you. This disease is dangerous." (Uhuru, 2020C): (https://www.youtube.com/results?search_ query=president+uhuru+6th+address+on+c orona+vius)

This narrative serves both as a cautionary tale and a moral lesson, illustrating the consequences of individualistic behaviour in the context of public health. That is, by framing the story around the young man's journey, the speaker constructs a trajectory from individual triumph to collective tragedy, thereby demonstrating the social repercussions of non-compliance. According to Leeuwen (2008) and Said (2017), mythopoesis functions as a powerful tool for legitimizing actions and encouraging compliance with social norms through storytelling. In this context, for instance, the speaker in the excerpt above gives the story of a young man who believed he had successfully evaded law enforcement to travel undetected during the pandemic. In this way, this narrative serves both as a cautionary tale and a moral lesson: the young man's actions, rooted in self-interest and disregard for public health guidelines, result in harm to others, thereby illustrating the consequences of "deviant activities" (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 117). In this respect, by framing the story around the young man's journey from Mombasa, including escaping "roadblocks" and traveling to a place "where the disease had not been heard of," the speaker successfully constructs a clear trajectory from individual triumph to collective tragedy, thereby demonstrating the social repercussions of individualistic behaviour. The moral undertone of the narrative is reinforced by the admonition that "loving oneself more than loving those who love you" is dangerous, pointing to the need for communal concern and adherence to collective norms (Schnurr et al., 2015).

From the perspective of Wodak's (2015; 2018) concept of tops of history and Fairclough's (1995;

2020) notion of historicity that emphasizes the importance of context and the temporal dimensions of discourse, by framing the actions of the young man within the contemporary crisis, the speaker invokes a sense of urgency and reality surrounding the corona-virus disease. The historical context is strategically used to legitimize the call for action by all Kenyans, in addition to anchoring his message in a broader narrative specific to national identity and responsibility during a crisis. From the perspective of leadership communication, by highlighting the historical milestones achieved in combating the pandemic, the speaker not only justifies his leadership, but also utilizes historical legitimacy to prompt action among citizens. Moreover, the speaker's narrative technique of juxtaposing personal failure against a backdrop of collective achievement serves as a compelling rhetorical device both for emphasizing the consequences of inaction and the need for immediate and collective compliance to the given health directives.

In the same vein, using the Us/Them dichotomy (Van Dijik, 2001; Oddo, 2011; Sowinska, 2013; Khajavi & Rasti, 2020) as a delegitimizing strategy, where the 'us' entails large groups of people/states including the speaker and the audience, and 'them' a smaller group of 'others' who are often depicted as doing 'the wrong' or 'bad' things" (Schnurr et al., 2015, p. 197), the speaker reiterates that,

25) We have recently experienced cases within our country where transmission was from our political and religious leaders who unfortunately did not heed the guidance by the Ministry of Health on self-quarantine and social distancing. I therefore once more call on everyone to wash hands frequently with hand sanitizers or soap and water for at least 20 seconds (Uhuru, 202A).

In this context, the speaker uses the *us/them* strategy within a historical context to delegitimize political and religious leaders, by presenting them as breaking or violating the given rules/health protocols proposed by the WHO and the Ministry of Health in Kenya. By portraying them in a more negative light, and "presenting alternative courses of action" (Hansson, 2017), the speaker uses the presupposed undesirable behaviour of political and religious leaders as a justification for his leadership role in calling for collective action: "I therefore once more call on everyone to wash

hands frequently with hand sanitizers or soap and water for at least 20 seconds." In this way, therefore, the speaker can be said to be using *Cautionary tales to* delegitimize the actions of those seen as operating against the set rules, thereby legitimizing his moral responsibility to act during the pandemic. It is in this sense that Said (2017) posits that where the speaker has authoritative power that is socio-political in nature, legitimation practices can be enacted with the express aim of achieving compliance, more so, where those in authority strive to defend an action, decision or policy, by persuading the audience of its rightfulness, hence their compliance with it.

6. Conclusions

This study elucidates how the speaker employed various discursive strategies rooted in Van Leeuwen's (2007; 2008) and Van Leeuwen and Wodak's (1999) frameworks, to navigate the varied challenges posed by a national crisis. In this context, the study findings reveal that the speaker utilizes appeals to tradition, personal authority, and moral evaluation in shaping public perception and fostering compliance to the given public health directives (see sections 5.1-5.5). Following Van Leeuwen (2008), invoking tradition serves to reinforce a sense of continuity and stability, thereby legitimizing contemporary actions by aligning them with historical successes. As such, the speaker's references to Kenya's collective resilience were found to be tailored not only to evoke a shared national identity but also to mobilize public sentiment toward cooperative action. Moreover, this strategic reliance on historical narratives underscores the importance of collective memory in legitimizing governmental authority, suggesting that such approaches can effectively cultivate a sense of hope and unity among citizens.

Furthermore, the invocation of personal authority was noted to be a significant rhetorical strategy that serves to enhance the legitimacy of the speaker's directives. That is, by asserting his position as the head of state and employing authoritative language, the speaker was found to be focused on establishing a clear chain of command that compels adherence to government mandates (See section 5.2). However, this reliance on conformity authorization was found to raise significant questions about the balance between authority and democratic engagement, as effective leadership communication ought to in practice to foster an inclusive environment that values diverse perspectives (Edmondson & Levy, 2019).

The study further confirms the strategic use of instrumental rationalization, emotional appeals through storytelling/cautionary tales and moral evaluations to legitimize the government's response to the pandemic by framing the situation as a moral crisis that necessitates collective action (see sections 5.3-5.5.1). By evoking fear and empathy, the speaker effectively mobilizes public sentiments, reinforcing the idea that individual actions are crucial to the collective well-being (Reyes, 2011; Cap, 2017). Overall, the findings demonstrate that the Kenyan government' discourse on COVID-19 employed varied strategies of legitimation, namely authority of tradition, personal authority, instrumental rationalization, legitimation through emotional appeals, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis/storytelling, to justify the government's actions and policy decision.

7. Implications of the Study

This study highlights how effective communication strategies can enhance the legitimacy of governmental actions in times of crisis, illustrating the critical role of rhetoric in shaping public perception and compliance. By employing various legitimation strategies—such as appeals to tradition, moral evaluations, and emotional appeals (see sections 5.1-5.5), the speaker not only justified his administration's decisions but also fostered a sense of national unity and collective responsibility. This underscores the importance of contextually relevant communication that resonates with the populace's values and experiences, particularly in an African setting where historical narratives and communal identity are pivotal. Furthermore, the findings suggest that leaders must balance authority with inclusivity to avoid perceptions of authoritarianism, thereby promoting democratic engagement even during crises. This understanding contributes to our understanding of how political discourse can be strategically utilized to navigate complex socio-political landscapes, highlighting the need for embracing a more nuanced approach that balances authority with inclusivity and moral responsibility in the face of crises.

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