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Armed militia helped a Michigan barbershop open, a coronavirus defiance that puts Republican lawmakers in a bind

By **Moriah Balingit**

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OWOSSO, Mich. — Armed members of the Michigan Home Guard stood outside Karl Manke's barbershop, ready to blockade the door if police arrived. They were determined to help Manke, 77, reopen his shop Monday, in defiance of state orders, and dozens joined them, wearing Trump sweatshirts and Trump cowboy hats and waving Trump flags.

They gathered not because they desperately needed haircuts but to rail against Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's approach to fighting the coronavirus outbreak in Michigan, one of the nation's worst hot spots. They were channeling President Trump's support of such protests, but some also were taking aim at the state's Republicans, who they say have not done enough to "liberate" the state from safety measures that have ground life to a halt.

Michelle Gregoire, a 29-year-old school bus driver from Battle Creek who is running as a Republican for a seat in the state House, waved a yellow "Don't tread on me" flag at passing traffic. She derided Whitmer as "a tyrant." But she also urged

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The protest and others like it — including two last month that included demonstrators with swastikas, Confederate flags and some with long guns inside the capitol — have alarmed lawmakers on both sides of the aisle. But after Trump appeared to urge the militia members on, tweeting that they are “very good people” who “want their lives back again,” they have forced Michigan’s Republican lawmakers to strike a delicate balance, managing a deadly virus while also being careful not to contradict Trump or alienate their conservative supporters.

Though the coronavirus has infected more than 48,000 people in Michigan and has killed 4,674 as of Tuesday — the fourth-highest total in the nation — many of the protesters live in areas that have barely been touched by the virus but have been struggling with economic collapse because of it. GOP state lawmakers, who hold narrow margins in both the state House and Senate, have tried distancing themselves from the most vocal protesters while being careful not to appear to hew too closely to Whitmer’s shutdown policies.

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“The less partisan we can be through this entire process, the sooner we’ll get out of it,” said Lee Chatfield (R), the 31-year-old speaker of the House who was working on the floor to adopt some of the governor’s restrictions when armed militiamen entered the capitol building. “There are people who want to take covid-19 seriously but believe the governor’s approach is the wrong call for our state,” he said, referring to the disease caused by the virus.

Generally, residents of Michigan agree with Whitmer’s approach, according to a Washington Post-Ipsos poll released Tuesday, in which 72 percent approve of her handling of the outbreak, and 25 percent disapprove. Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine (R) got the highest marks — 86 percent approval — but in general, Republican governors did not fare well in the poll, with Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp, who moved to open the state early, getting an approval rating of just 39 percent.

Whitmer said in an interview Tuesday that she worries Republican state lawmakers, who have said she does not have the authority to continue her coronavirus executive order, are pushing people to violate it.

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“They are feeding a lot into the behavior,” Whitmer said. “We would be so much better off if everyone with a platform focused on the science and less about politics.”

Protesters in Michigan have sought a radical turnabout in the state's response to the pandemic, with some demanding that Whitmer lift all restrictions. Many come from fringe movements and harbor deep suspicion of health officials and their warnings; the activists insist that the government has inflated the death toll and blown the dangers out of proportion. The event's main organizer, Ryan Kelley, a real estate agent from outside Grand Rapids, said he invited members of a local militia to the protests in Lansing as "security."

Chatfield, who appeared onstage with Trump at a rally in Battle Creek in December, said he disagrees with protesters who believe the death toll reported by the state is inflated. He worries that the activists are making it difficult for Republicans pitching more pragmatic reopening plans to be heard.

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"Those voices are getting drowned by those who are being over the line and derogatory," Chatfield said.

Mike Shirkey (R), the state Senate's majority leader, was more direct, condemning protesters who "used threats of violence to stir up fear and rancor." Some lawmakers, frightened by the heavily armed demonstrators, wore bulletproof vests during the protests April 30.

“They do not represent Senate Republicans,” Shirkey said in a statement. “At best, those so-called protesters are a bunch of jackasses.”

Kelley, the organizer of the protest, said he was disappointed that many Republican lawmakers did not want to lift all restrictions immediately.

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“You’re elected to serve the people,” he said. “You’re not elected to serve yourself.”

Leftward shift

The coronavirus response debate in recent days here encapsulates the state’s political dynamics, which traditionally have gravitated toward the center, with moderates on both sides.

While Trump won the state by 10,700 votes in 2016, there are signs Michigan is shifting to the left as it again stands to be a major battleground in 2020. That shift is apparent in Kent County, which encompasses the late president Gerald R. Ford's hometown, Grand Rapids. The county has the fourth-highest number of virus cases in the state and is the epicenter of the outbreak in western Michigan, where Trump performed well in 2016. Two years after Trump beat Hillary Clinton by three points in Kent County, Whitmer bested Republican Bill Schuette, who had been the state's attorney general, by four percentage points.

Moderate Democrats also won two congressional seats that had been occupied by Republicans in 2018.

Now, some see signs that Trump's attacks on Whitmer — and his support of hard-line protesters — could further endanger his prospects. Trump has railed against the first-term governor on Twitter and on television, at one point calling her “ ‘Half Whitmer’ ” in a tweet. At a news briefing in late March, after Whitmer criticized the federal response as inadequate, Trump insinuated that Whitmer was ungrateful and said he had instructed Vice President Pence not to call her. He did not use her name, referring to her as “the woman in Michigan.”

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Rep. Fred Upton, a moderate Republican who represents a slice of western Michigan and faces a tough reelection challenge, has been working nearly round-the-clock from the side porch at his home in St. Joseph, helping constituents affected by the pandemic. He declined to comment on Trump's attacks on Whitmer, with whom he communicates regularly via text message.

"I'm focused on what my people want me to do, and that is continue to solve problems," Upton said. "That's where my focus has been, rather than point fingers. That's just not my style."

Shortly before Trump's attacks began, Michigan's entire congressional delegation — including six Republicans — had written a letter to the vice president pressing him to give the state more personal protective equipment. What the state had received, they wrote, was "inadequate given the circumstances."

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"We urge you to immediately approve Michigan's pending requests for PPE and testing materials to the extent feasible," they wrote in the March 25 letter, which was first reported by the Michigan Advance.

Whitmer has capitalized on the attention drawn from the attacks, steadfastly backing her cautious approach to the virus and reveling in being seen as anti-Trump. She wore a T-shirt emblazoned with “That woman from Michigan” on an interview with the “The Daily Show’s” Trevor Noah on April 1. Her response to the pandemic has aided her rise and has put her in contention to be a possible running mate for Joe Biden.

Anita Kruschinska, a 46-year-old who owns a rabbit-and-poultry farm in northern Michigan, voted for Trump in 2016 and for Whitmer’s Republican opponent, Schuette, in 2018. But she supports Whitmer’s approach to the pandemic and wishes the governor would have extended restrictions that discouraged city dwellers from heading to vacation homes in her part of the state. She has an autoimmune disorder, and she believes the virus could be a death sentence for her.

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She was critical of the Trump administration’s handling of the pandemic and said it could influence how she will vote this year.

“They downplayed it too much,” Kruschinska said. She was waiting to see “how it all plays out” before she decides.

'Accelerated' politics

Several leaders, including Whitmer, have expressed fear that the protests endanger efforts to curtail the virus, in part because they involve large crowds of people who are disregarding recommendations to socially distance. Sandy Baruah, who heads the Detroit Regional Chamber and previously led the U.S. Small Business Administration under President George W. Bush, said those who disobey the restrictions could spread the virus.

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“It’s something we’re concerned about because it has really accelerated the political dynamic in what really is a public health emergency,” Baruah said. “The governor and the legislative leaders have not found a way to work together during this crisis.”

Baruah worries that the growing partisan rancor could become its own public health emergency. State lawmakers began challenging the governor’s authority to extend her emergency declaration at the end of April and last week sued the governor. Activists saw an opening, and some groups began urging members to reopen their businesses.

State Rep. Mark Huizenga (R), whose district includes Kent County, said he did not want business owners to defy the governor's orders, even though he backed the lawsuit challenging her authority, saying that he is "operating under the direction that this is the law."

But at the barbershop in Owosso, the local sheriff has said he will not enforce Whitmer's orders. Republican lawmakers have not backed Whitmer's efforts to get businesses to comply. Chatfield's spokesman, Gideon D'Assandro, called Whitmer's orders "legally questionable at best."

The conflict has left business owners such as Bill Mansfield, who owns a lavender farm that draws tourists from around the world during the summer season, in a tough spot. Mansfield said he wants more clarity on when restrictions for public gatherings might change. The farm rents out its finished barn for concerts, parties and weddings, and he is unsure what to tell his customers.

"We have brides and their families who are calling and saying: 'What's the story here? What's the refund policy?'" he said. "We're prepared to move forward with whatever rules, but we just don't know what the rules are."

Mansfield, a Republican, said his views also do not align with protesters who want to see the state reopen immediately. He worries what that could mean for his staff who interact with the public, selling lavender face masks and cookies at the gift shop, and giving tours of the farm.

"I love my employees," he said. "I'm not interested in the crazy side of that, where I just want to open up no matter the cost."

Coronavirus: What you need to read

The Washington Post is providing some coronavirus coverage free, including:

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