



Democratic Principles at Test: How Asian Democracies Are Combating the Pandemic

I. Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic presents democratic countries with the dual agenda of managing and controlling the pandemic meanwhile maintaining and preserving democratic principles. Democracies in Asia including South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, India and Indonesia have taken different measures in response to the pandemic. In terms of both the number of infected people and the infection rate adjusted to the population size, these five Asian countries are most infected in the order of India, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Panelists of this webinar explain the quarantine measures and the challenges posed to their democratic governance.

How Did Asian Democracies Respond to COVID-19?

- **Immigration Control and Domestic Lockdowns:** Five Asian countries have taken immigration control measures to stop the inflow of the virus from other countries. Taiwan took preemptive immigration control measures while South Korea and Japan have attempted to maintain open borders, by administering tests and social distancing guidance. Some measures are more conspicuous than those related to immigration. South Korea, Japan and Taiwan stand out as three countries that did not impose domestic lockdowns unlike India and Indonesia which enforced complete and partial lockdowns respectively. India enforced a 21-day nationwide lockdown within only four hours of prior notice, causing significant domestic chaos. This measure has put many urban migrant workers, who are anxious to return to their hometown, in a predicament.
- **3Ts (Test-Tracing-Treatment):** South Korea and Taiwan implemented 3T strategies more extensively whereas Japan, Indonesia and India showed limited testing capacity. South Korea and Taiwan tracked individuals who tested positive and those entering the country using mobile applications, with South Korea even using GPS data, credit card records, and security cameras for contact tracing. On the other hand, only one percent of the Japanese population was tested, one of the lowest testing rates worldwide. Indonesia's provincial governments and local hospitals did not have enough resources to match up to the testing and treatment requirements. India, despite having managed to increase its daily testing capacity to more than a million, still has long way to go due to its under-resourced public health system.

Combat the Virus or Save the Economy?

- **Quarantine vs. Economy:** Achieving balance between lockdown and daily economic life arises as a crucial concern for democracies, especially as the pandemic is expected to continue until next year. **Indonesia's** policy, Pembatasan Aktivitas Bersekala Besar (PSBB), is an illustration of such a concern. It limits the movement of citizens to certain locations with guidelines are provided by experts. **South Korea** has also been recognized as a country that has sought for balance by partially reducing people's mobility based on mass testing and contact tracing and by utilizing the public quarantine strategy that avoids extreme limitations. These measures were met by bottom-up efforts to cooperate with the government guidelines.

Rule of Law: Crisis or Chance?

- Democracy continued in some countries, but others took advantage of the pandemic situation as a pretext for the misuse of democratic values. **Japan** saw continued support for rule of law even after the situation was declared a national emergency, as freedom of press, speech and assembly, as well as access to information were allowed as long as there was social distancing. The government also refrained from using contact tracing due to privacy concerns.
- **South Korea**, according to *Varieties of Democracy's* Pandemic Democratic Violation Index, is one of the 24 countries out of 146 that did not violate democratic values in responding to COVID-19: there was no time limit on emergency measures; no discriminatory measures; no de-jure violation of non-derogable rights; no restriction on media freedom; no disproportionate limitation on the role of legislature; and no abusive enforcement.
- **Taiwan** safeguarded its democracy from information warfare and disinformation campaigns. The Taiwanese administration attempted to deter authoritarian attempts to spread disinformation defaming its performance by acting swiftly and effectively to share correct information.
- **India** is experiencing misuse of emergency power from the executive branch, with the pandemic as an “easy excuse” for extending its power: many states are imposing censorship on media reporting, penalizing and in some cases, arresting people who raise inconvenient questions about the state response to pandemic. At the same time, India’s judiciary and legislative pillars are being largely paralyzed as COVID-19 closed operations within the parliament and state assemblies, and as courts operate virtually to hear urgent matters, making room for almost “draconian” executive branch to pass ordinances.

Bipartisan Consensus: Fighting Together or Fighting Against One Another?

- Bipartisan consensus and the conveying of a consistent message remain a priority during a crisis when citizens become highly vulnerable to fake news and disinformation. Most Asian countries have effectively done so, with **Taiwan** overcoming the politically divided bipartisan system and both parties jointly responding with “one heart.”
- **South Korea's** ruling and opposition parties also reached consensus in handling the pandemic, and successfully gained public trust, helping the nation to rise as an exemplary case in responding to the pandemic. Nevertheless, this did not lead to unconditional bipartisan agreement, as viewed by a drastic fall in President Moon’s approval rating from 71 percent in May to 39 percent in August after the proposal of several bills unrelated to COVID-19. This shows that political support for the government depends heavily on voters’ perception of its performance rather than its partisanship.
- **India** saw bipartisan support in the beginning of pandemic but soon entered a period of sharp polarization between the ruling and opposition parties, greatly harming collective efforts to fight the rapidly spreading pandemic. **Indonesia** did not see harsh opposition as major opposition leaders have been absorbed in the Jokowi Kabinet since 2019. However, some opposition leaders and parties have questioned the concept of emergency stated in the decree.

Hand in Hand with Civil Society?

- **Taiwan** is a country of highly vibrant civil societies in the region, which was once again manifested in the time of pandemic. Civil society has collaborated with the government to fight against COVID-19, beginning with the development of mobile applications to let citizens know of stocks of facial masks, and the creation of effective information campaigns for encouraging its citizens to follow the government’s rules. Similarly,

Japan was able to maintain democracy by preserving its civic space and media freedom.

- Civil society in **Indonesia** is struggling, but it is continuing to exercise checks and balance against the government. However, the mainstream media, which is largely owned by political leaders, remains politicized and polarized, making it difficult to share right information and maintain freedom of expression.

Where Do Minorities Stand?

- Emergency crisis further marginalizes the minority, as illustrated by the case of **Indonesia** where 90 percent of its population works in the informal sector with no money to pay the rent and no means to work from home. The Muslim community in **India** has also been the target of Islamophobia (linked to the Tablighi Jamaat incident in mid-March) and stigmatized as a spreader of the virus. Similarly, religious minorities in **South Korea** including *Sincheonji*, a religious cult, and far-right Protestant churches are confronting rising criticisms. In **Japan**, the government implemented discriminatory policies towards the vulnerable minority including schoolchildren of Korean schools by excluding them from the list of recipients eligible for the government's economic support. However, **Taiwan** is effectively protecting its minority, protecting migrant workers by requiring employers to provide them with facial masks.

Challenges ahead of the 'Nth Wave'?

- **South Korean** government's capacity to respond to the pandemic is now being tested, in the face of its second big wave. Dealing with the religious minority including Protestants, whose size is expected to grow, and striking the balance between liberty and security will be necessary.
- **Japanese** government's decision-making process lacks a science-based approach, and does not provide full-scale testing capacity. Japan made policy, such as the "Go To Travel" campaign, without sufficient prior consultations with public health experts, leading to an increase in confirmed cases. Japan also needs to enhance its testing capacity, by moving away from the current system where citizens have to go through health centers to ask permission for testing.
- **Indonesia's** key governmental agenda is to address the problem of inequality. Currently, the majority of its population faces the threat of losing livelihoods. Networks of activism in civil society, media and the government should all conjoin to cooperatively deal with the problem.
- Similarly, **India's** millions of migrants and low-wage laborers were hit hardest by the lockdown, one of the toughest of its kind. The lockdown made life difficult for millions and made them incapable of paying their monthly rents. This is critical as 90% of Indian laborers belong to the informal sector, of which 70 % do not have regular social protection such as pensions or health insurance. Adding to woes, India's GDP has contracted (24%) to an all time low raising doubts about the state's capacity to fight the prolonged pandemic. ■

II. Chair & Panelists

■ **Sook Jong Lee** is a professor of public administration at Sungkyunkwan University and senior fellow of the East Asia Institute. She has been directing the Asian Democracy Research Network since its formation in 2015, leading a network of about nineteen research organizations across Asia to promote democracy with the support of the National Endowment for Democracy. Her recent publications include *Transforming Global Governance with Middle Power Diplomacy: South Korea's Role in the 21st Century* (ed. 2016), and *Keys to Successful Presidency in South Korea* (ed. 2013 and 2016).

■ **Ketty W. Chen** is the Vice President of the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD). She is responsible for overseeing international affairs and general administration at the TFD. Dr. Chen is a political scientist by training and received her doctoral degree in political science from the University of Oklahoma, specializing in comparative politics, democratization, international relations and political philosophy. Dr. Chen also holds two Master's degrees in political science and international relations from the University of Oklahoma and dual Bachelor of Arts degrees in political science and psychology from the Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. Dr. Chen also served as the Chair of the Women's Rights Working Group for Liberal International and has been referenced in a number of publications and international media outlets, including the Wall Street Journal, the Associated Press, Al Jazeera, LA Times, New York Times, Financial Times, Voice of America, BBC-World, Libération and Le Monde. Her book chapters on Taiwan's social movement in "Taiwan's Social Movements Under Ma Ying-jeou" and "Cities Unsilenced" were published in 2017.

■ **Maiko Ichihara** is an Associate Professor in the Graduate School of Law and the School of International and Public Policy at Hitotsubashi University, Japan. She is a committee member of the World Movement for Democracy, East Asia Democracy Forum, and Partnership for Democratic Governance (Japan). Throughout her career, she has undertaken research on international relations and democracy assistance. She earned her Ph.D. in political science from the George Washington University and her M.A. from Columbia University. Her recent publications include: "Universality to Plurality?: Values in Japanese Foreign Policy," in Yoichi Funabashi and G. John Ikenberry, eds., *The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism: Japan and the World Order* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2020); and *Japan's International Democracy Assistance as Soft Power: Neoclassical Realist Analysis* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018).

■ **I Ketut Putra Erawan** is an active scholar and researcher working on democracy issues in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. He is the executive director of Institute for Peace and Democracy, an Indonesian think-tank and the implementing agency of the Bali Democracy Forum. In 2005-2009, Dr. Erawan served as director of the Graduate Program in Political Science at Gadjah Mada University. He was a special advisor for the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, an expert for the Ministry of Interior Affairs of Indonesia, a member of the Steering Committee for the Australia and Indonesia Governance Research Partnership, a member of the Academic Committee of the Rotary Peace Center at the Chulalongkorn University in Thailand, and a consultant for the World Bank, World Bank Institute, UNDP, and various Indonesian agencies.

■ **Jung Kim** is currently an Assistant Professor at the University of North Korean Studies, South Korea. He teaches courses on International Relations in East Asia and Political Economy of the Two Koreas, among others.

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■ **Niranjan Sahoo** is Senior Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi since 2004. He has published extensively on issues of democracy, human rights, decentralized governance, constitutionalism, and nation-building in South Asia. His current research focuses on the domestic drivers of India's foreign policy objectives with regard to democracy and human rights in South Asia as well as new social movements and the changing nature of democracy in India. A recipient of 2010 ASIA Fellow Award (funded by The Ford Foundation), Dr. Sahoo recently was a Visiting Asia Fellow at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.



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