



[ADRN Online Seminar] Reassessing 2020: How Asia Coped with the COVID-19 Pandemic

Democratic Principles in Need amid the Pandemic Crisis

East Asia Institute (EAI)

I. Overview

It has been over a year since the unprecedented pandemic crisis devastated the world, resulting in hundred million confirmed cases and 2.16 million deaths worldwide as of January 2021. COVID-19 has inflicted grave damages on Asian countries, endangering the socioeconomy and livelihoods of already vulnerable communities. This pandemic incurred especially significant impacts on the rising democratic countries in Asia, placing them into a trilemma of limiting the spread of the virus, reviving the economy, and maintaining democracy.

This online seminar provides an overview of the COVID-19 situation in Thailand, the Philippines, and Nepal to analyze their responses at the public and private levels, and to propose policy recommendations for 2021. It serves as a preview to the upcoming publication by the Asia Democracy Research Network (ADRN), “Pandemic Crisis and Democratic Governance,” encompassing research from 12 countries in Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia.

II. Challenges Posed by COVID-19 and Asia’s Response

Thailand: Government-led Response against COVID-19

- **Central emergency communications:** Thailand faced communication challenges in delivering the government’s announcements in the initial stages of the pandemic. However, in March 2020, the COVID-19 Situation Management Center was established to serve as a central bureau that collects and reports information to the public on a daily basis. Under the leadership of the Prime Minister, all relevant agencies integrated their roles and operations in responding to the spread of coronavirus, contributing to an effective risk communications strategy.
- **Economic support plans:** The government provided financial support to unemployed people and vulnerable groups that have been severely impacted by COVID-19 and implemented lockdown measures. The state was especially tentative to the needs of small and medium sized enterprises in need of financial aid. 5000 baht allowance was provided for three months from April to June 2020, in an effort to prolong the economic cycle and empower them to handle with the crisis with liquidity.

The Philippines: COVID-19 Fuels the Rise of Corruption

- **Corruption scandal jeopardizes public health and finance:** The corruption risks in the health sector surfaced at the height of the COVID-19 crisis in 2020 when whistleblowers provided allegations of the



Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth)'s misuse of funds. Although the scandal was provoked by resigned workers, rampant financial violations had been previously observed in reports by the Commission on Audit. The PhilHealth scandal revealed the weak exercise of institutional control mechanisms in the state-run agency, and highlighted the importance of legislative and audit oversight agencies that function as accountability institutions within the system of checks-and-balances.

- **Economy crippled by coronavirus:** The Philippine economy suffered heavily with the onslaught of the COVID-19 virus, where its gross domestic product (GDP) dropped by 16.5% during the second quarter of 2020, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority. The country descended into economic recession given the two consecutive quarters of negative GDP growth in 2020, after the 0.7% GDP decline during the first quarter of 2020.

Nepal: Pandemic Limits Civic Space and Drives Corruption

- **Civic space shrunk by legal measures:** The government is implementing a series of amendment bills that would adversely affect the life of the vulnerable in Nepal who have already been hit hard by the pandemic. These bills include the National Human Rights Commissions Act, Media Council Bill, Bill on Mass Communication, and Bill on Information and Technology. At the same time, the Home Ministry recently instructed that the government distribute relief materials to victims of disasters only through the government, largely restricting roles of the civil society.
- **Corruption exacerbated by the pandemic:** In Nepal, which already ranks as the 113th least corrupt nation out of 180 countries, the level of perceived corruption rose significantly over the last year, according to a report by Transparency International. The case of medical procurement exemplifies such corruption and disbelief of citizens on the government. As the army was delegated the responsibility to purchase medical supplies, it was revealed that they exorbitantly added on prices for the items procured from China, exposing their collusion with Chinese suppliers.

III. Policy Recommendations

Thailand: Responses in Line with Democratic Principles

- **Government rules based on democratic governance:** The government should apply democratic governance in preventing the widespread outbreak of coronavirus, while maintaining its accountability on crisis management. Laws and regulations should be enforced to protect citizens from the damages of the pandemic by reducing socioeconomic impacts via government measures. The government must also be held accountable in managing future crises as the COVID-19 pandemic, while at the same time guaranteeing transparency in its operations and abiding by democratic principles.
- **Economic measures for the vulnerable:** Sufficient social support should be provided to vulnerable people, students, informal laborers, migrant workers, etc. in the time of pandemic to minimize the social impact coupled with economic recession.

The Philippines: Minimizing Information Asymmetry and Reviving Democratic Institutions

- **Information openness to prevent corruption:** Minimizing information asymmetry can reduce corruption vulnerability, as evidenced by the recent case of PhilHealth where the poor information technology system paved the way for fraudulent claims. As it was allegedly said that some regional officials managed to avoid



being assigned to other jurisdictions thanks to their strong political supports, corruption of public personnel is encouraged by a political culture driven by patronage. Likewise, the regular rotation of key officers and staff will lessen the risks of unhealthy relationships and corruption.

- **Revival of democratic institutions:** Reviving democratic institutions is a key to fighting corruption on a long-term basis. Democratic institutions serve to level the playing field both in political and economic aspects, enabling effective application of rules and incentives that govern our system. In an effort to counter the prevalence of corruption, it is important to strengthen public oversight agencies, especially the Civil Service Commission, Commission on Audit, and the Office of the Ombudsman, with enhanced financial and human resources. The outbreak of corruption scandals that accompanied the COVID-19 health crisis is an illustration of how democratic recession has negatively affected the state of public accountability, where the revival of democratic institutions will be crucial in fighting corruption as well as the pandemic.

Nepal: Good Governance as Key to Battling the Pandemic

- **Coherent national guidelines:** A broad central policy guideline on pandemic control should be developed at a national, provincial and local level, taking Nepal's contextual realities into consideration. Such relief standards set by the government need to correlate in the longer term, avoiding confusion and dispute over emergency management practices especially in the time of pandemic. The guideline should also involve and coordinate the roles of civil society organizations that can help the government deliver emergency supplies and necessary helps widely.
- **Support for the marginalized:** Government policies should effectively incorporate the marginalized citizens. Policies and tools for information sharing, communication and education need to be developed and disseminated exclusively for calamities like the coronavirus pandemic, earthquakes, floods, etc. The support and relief materials should also commensurate to the extent of marginalization and vulnerability of citizens. In tandem with the extended support for the vulnerable communities, laws should be strictly implemented against the violation of human rights of the marginalized and vulnerable communities, penalizing those who practice discrimination and exclusion during crises and pandemic. ■



IV. Moderator & Panelists

■ **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. Prior to this, from 2009-2015, he was a Lecturer at the Underwood International College and Graduate School of International Studies at Yonsei University. During this time, Mr. Kim was also a Chief Researcher at The East Asia Institute. He pursued his Bachelors and Masters in Political Science at Korea University and went on to pursue his Ph.D. at Yale University. His research interests include Comparative Politics and International Relations in East Asia.

■ **Thawilwadee Bureekul** is the Director of the Research and Development Office at King Prajadhipok's Institute, Thailand. She previously served on the National Reform Steering Committee, the National Reform Council, and the Constitutional Drafting Assembly. Her current academic interests lie in the field of good governance and gender equity, such as participatory and gender responsive budgeting; the preparation of action plans for leadership development and women's participation in politics and decision-making; and gender-responsive local development planning and budgeting manuals. She has been heavily dedicated to research related to democracy, good governance, social equality, public participation, public policy, and voting behaviors. In 2015, she was the recipient of a prestigious award given to an outstanding woman by the National Council of Women of Thailand. She also succeeded in proposing "Gender Responsive Budgeting" in the Thai Constitution and was accordingly presented with the "Women of the Year 2018" award by the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women.

■ **Francisco A. Magno** teaches Political Science and Development Studies at De La Salle University (DLSU), Manila, Philippines. He is the Founding Director of the DLSU Jesse M. Robredo Institute of Governance. He served as president of the Philippine Political Science Association from 2015 to 2017. He completed his PhD in political science at the University of Hawaii.

■ **Pradip Pariyar** is the executive chairperson at SAMATA Foundation, which conducts policy research and advocates for the rights of the Dalits, the most marginalized community in Nepal, in order to end caste-based discrimination. As the elected president of the Association of Youth Organizations Nepal (AYON), he worked closely with government of Nepal to initiate a youth-responsive budget. He was a member of the government task force that developed Youth Vision 2025, a 10-year governmental national youth development policy plan. He has trained thousands of youths in leadership, peacebuilding, and conflict-sensitive journalism across Asia and Africa. He founded the Nepal Youth Forum to focus on policy advocacy, awareness, and youth empowerment. In 2011, Pariyar was selected as a youth fellow by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Pariyar serves as the chairperson of the Nepal Policy Center, a youth-led think tank. In 2015, he received the Youth Leadership Award from the Nepali Government's Ministry of Youth and Sports for his decade-long contribution to youth leadership development across Nepal. He also received Asia 21 young Leaders Award from The Asia Society, New York. In 2020 He received Young Global Leaders Award from World Economic Forum.



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