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## Introduction. Asia in 2020: The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact

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## FOREWORD

### ASIA IN 2020: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ITS IMPACT

The most important development of 2020 was, without doubt, the pandemic of the Coronavirus disease (henceforth COVID-19). The outbreak began at the end of 2019 and rapidly escalated to become a worldwide phenomenon within the first few months of 2020. The first cases of the novel coronavirus were discovered in the city of Wuhan, China, at the end of December. One of the World Health Organization's offices in the People's Republic of China noted a media statement by the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission, which, on its website, signalled some cases of «viral pneumonia».<sup>1</sup> Municipal and provincial authorities in Wuhan and Hubei respectively, initially downplayed the risks of the new disease and did not take the stringent measures that could have prevented its spread, lest they displeased the higher echelons of the Chinese Communist Party.

The scale of the contagion, and the local authorities' lack of decisiveness in handling the outbreak were further magnified by Chinese New Year celebrations. Millions of people went on holiday both within and outside China, thereby allowing the virus to circulate uncontrolled. At the beginning of the 40-day period during which China celebrates the Lunar New Year and families reunite, there were estimates suggesting that as many as 3 billion trips took place during that time.<sup>2</sup>

As countries across Asia started to report their first cases of COVID-19 from early January onwards,<sup>3</sup> there was increasing evidence that the virus was spreading far and wide and that no country was going to be exempt from it. As a result, most countries implemented a set of measures that resulted in a «global lockdown rush»<sup>4</sup> that were characterized by a high degree of policy convergence – aside that is from a few notable exceptions discussed below. The data presented in Table 1 are based on the «Stringency Index» devised by the COVID-19 Government Response Tracker at the University of Oxford. This is a composite

1. World Health Organization, *Listings of WHO's response to COVID-19*, 29 June 2020.

2. '3 billion journeys: World's biggest human migration begins in China', *CNN*, 10 January 2020.

3. The first case outside China was recorded in Thailand on 10 January. See: World Health Organization, 'WHO statement on novel coronavirus in Thailand', 13 January 2020.

4. Thomas Hale, 'What we learned from tracking every COVID policy in the world', *The Conversation*, 24 March 2021.

measure based on nine response indicators including school closures, workplace closures, and travel bans, rescaled to a value from 0 to 100, the latter being the strictest.

Country	Stringency Index on 30 March 2020	Stringency Index on 31 December 2020
Afghanistan	67.59	12.04
Bangladesh	87.04	80.9
China	73.61	78.24
Timor- Leste	75.00	52.78
Hong Kong	63.89	71.30
India	100	68.98
Iran	96.30	72.69
Japan	40.74	48.15
Kazakhstan	92.13	68.52
Korea	75.93	66.20
Malaysia	74.07	67.13
Myanmar	57.41	75.93
Pakistan	96.30	64.35
Philippines	100	55.09
Sri Lanka	100	78.24
Taiwan	31.48	19.44

Source: Thomas Hale, Noam Angrist, Rafael Goldszmidt, Beatriz Kira, Anna Petherick, Toby Phillips, Samuel Webster, Emily Cameron-Blake, Laura Hallas, Saptarshi Majumdar, and Helen Tatlow, 'A global panel database of pandemic policies (Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker)', *Nature Human Behavior*, Vol. 5, 2021, pp. 529–538.

In Asia, as in many other parts of the world, there were countries which responded effectively to the outbreak and were successful in tackling the virus. Places like Taiwan, South Korea and Mongolia had lower numbers of infections and deaths than other countries in the region. Taiwan in particular, as pointed out by Aurelio Insisa in his article in this volume, «emerged as one of the few polities able to effectively put the COVID-19 pandemic under control»; even more remarkable was that it did so «without resorting to lockdown strategies, relying instead on timely decision-making, and effective tracing, testing, and treating».

The abovementioned countries managed to both flatten the curve of contagion and to keep it flat throughout. At the opposite end of the spectrum, there were a large number of countries that faced more difficulties in handling the pandemic, including Kazakhstan, India, Bangladesh, the Philippines, and Pakistan. In the case of the two largest South Asian countries, as Diego Maiorano notes in his article, Pakistan and India took two different gambles. Islamabad, by deciding against imposing a national lockdown on

the grounds that it would have deprived working class Pakistanis from their livelihoods, hoped that the COVID-19-induced fatality rate would not result in a death toll of catastrophic proportions. Conversely, New Delhi imposed one of the strictest lockdowns worldwide, announced only hours before its implementation. Neither policy, as shown by Marco Corsi and Diego Maiorano in the case of Pakistan and India respectively, was particularly successful. But the harshness and absolute disregard for the poorest strata of the population, which characterized India's lockdown policy, entailed massive human costs.

Between those countries that successfully contained the spread of the virus and those that struggled to keep it under control, there were some – a case in point is Myanmar, analyzed in this volume by Matteo Fumagalli – which successfully managed to contain the first wave in March 2020, but were then hit hard in the second half of the year.



While government policies across Asia had mixed results in containing the global pandemic, the plummeting economic performance was the single common feature characterizing all countries both globally and in Asia. In the case of the countries analyzed in this volume, the economic downturn affecting all of them is clear from the data reported in Table 2

Country	2019	2020	2021
Afghanistan	3.9	-5.0	3.0
Bangladesh	8.2	3.8	4.4
China	6.1	1.9	8.2
Hong Kong	-1.2	-7.5	3.7
India	4.2	-10.3	8.8
Japan	0.7	-5.3	2.3
Kazakhstan	4.5	-2.5	2.5
Korea	2.0	-1.9	2.9
Malaysia	4.3	-6.0	7.8
Myanmar	6.5	2.0	5.7
Pakistan	1.0	-1.5	1.3
Philippines	6.0	-8.3	7.4
Sri Lanka	2.3	-4.6	5.3
Taiwan	2.7	0.0	3.2
Timor-Leste	4.1	-7.0	1.8

Sources: The World Bank, *Timor-Leste Economic Reports*, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/timor-leste/publication/timor-leste-economic-report>; Jonathan D. Ostry, 'Engines Not Yet in Sync: A Multispeed Recovery in Asia', *IMF Blog*, 21 October 2020; Sjamsu Rahardja & Azamat Agaidarov, 'Kazakhstan Economic Update: A Slow Recovery Through the COVID-19 Crisis (English)', Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2020; 'Pakistan Development Update. Navigating Uncertain Times', Washington, DC: World Bank Group, April 2021.

Governments throughout Asia had to impose strict lockdowns, while simultaneously pouring vast amounts of resources to boost testing capacity and provide financial support to businesses and families. Those countries, especially in East and South-East Asia, which were highly dependent on China's supplies saw their economies plummet. The economic downturn, nonetheless, was by no means limited to China-dependent economies. As Table 2 shows, out of the 14 countries analyzed in this year's volume, only two had a positive growth rate in 2020; testament to the devastating economic effects caused by the growing pandemic. Estimates from the World Bank forecast that South Asia will be the region in the world with the largest share of COVID-19-induced poor.<sup>5</sup> This is not all, however, as increasing poverty is worsened by increasing inequality. As pointed out by the International Monetary Fund, the COVID-19 pandemic «poses a high risk of further worsening inequality». Visible adverse effects are already conditioning both younger workers – who have suffered greater job losses than other age categories – and women, especially in relation to the gender pay gap, which has widened further.<sup>6</sup>



The economic and social downturn just outlined, coupled with the measures implemented by countries to stop the spread of the virus, concealed and, in some cases exacerbated, a number of pre-existing trends, already affecting most Asian countries.<sup>7</sup> The overwhelming focus on the handling of the pandemic, and the emergency powers that governments had to assume to contain the spread of the virus, provided authoritarian governments and leaders with the ideal opportunity to increase their grip on power. According to the latest Freedom House data, 78 countries globally saw a decline in their democratic score, with only 28 showing improvement. As part of the ongoing democratic recession, less than 20% of the world's population now lives in a free country, the smallest proportion since 1995.<sup>8</sup>

Democratic backsliding and erosion of democratic institutions were visible throughout countries in East, South and Central Asia. In Malaysia, the year under review brought about a change in government that came as a result of members of parliament defecting from their original party, after

5. Paul Blake & Divyanshi Wadhwa, '2020 Year in Review: The impact of COVID-19 in 12 charts', *World Bank Group*, 14 December 2020.

6. Emilia Jurzyk, Medha Madhu Nair, Nathalie Pouokam, Tahsin Saadi Sedik, Anthony Tan, Irina Yakadina (2020) 'COVID-19 and Inequality in Asia: Breaking the Vicious Cycle', *IMF Working Paper 20/217*.

7. See: Michelguglielmo Torri, Nicola Mocci & Filippo Boni, 'Asia in 2019: The escalation of the US-China contraposition, and the authoritarian involution of Asian societies', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXX / 2019.

8. Sarah Repucci & Amy Slipowitz, 'Freedom in the World 2021 Democracy under Siege', Freedom House 2021.

backdoor agreements had been reached. As Saleena Salim highlights in her article, this development marked a discontinuity in Malaysia's democratic evolution as, for the first time in the country's postcolonial history, a government assumed power without being chosen by the people.

In Hong Kong Special Autonomous Region, under the guise of COVID-19, Beijing unilaterally imposed the National Security Law. It was a move that dealt a major blow to Hong Kong's rule of law and, as Sheldon Wong notes in his article, not only breached the «One Country, Two Systems» arrangement, but also «provided new tools of lawfare for an accelerated round of repression rolling back fundamental rights and freedoms and institutionalizing a policy shift towards direct rule».

As discussed by Yvan Ysmael T. Yonaha and Esther Mary L. Calvo, in the Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte's rule further consolidated during the year under scrutiny. The government in Manila, like many other countries around the world, introduced emergency legislation granting special powers to the President. While the new laws did not prevent the government's mismanagement of the COVID-induced crisis, they severely restricted already limited personal liberty. In particular the Anti-Terror Law allowed people to be arbitrarily labelled as terrorists and detained without a warrant or charges, including for speech-related offenses.

In Iran, conservative factions won a sweeping victory in parliamentary elections held in February 2020, which represented a major setback for the centrist President Hassan Rouhani that saw his support shrink significantly. The country was also one of the most affected in the region by the COVID-19 pandemic. The health crisis, coupled with the consequences of sanctions imposed by the US, had a huge impact on the Iranian economy.

India, once considered the world's largest democracy, has been on a worrisome trajectory of democratic backsliding in recent years, with the COVID-19 related dynamics further enhancing the continuing trend towards a diminished form of democracy. In handling the pandemic, Prime Minister Narendra Modi adopted a style of governance that weakened the position of India's states. Simultaneously, his government carried out a massive crackdown on expression of dissent by the media, academics, civil society groups, and protesters. As Professor Rahul Mukherji of the South Asia Institute at Heidelberg University noted in the *Journal of Democracy*, «the hollowing-out of judicial review and the government's attacks on the media have intensified the threat to democratic governance».<sup>9</sup> Mukherji, along with many other commentators, concludes that India is indeed sliding towards «competitive authoritarianism», or what Michelguglielmo Torri, in his article in the present volume, by conflating two Italian words – *democrazia* (democracy) and *dittatura* (dictatorship) – defines as

9. Rahul Mukherji, 'Covid vs. Democracy: India's Illiberal Remedy', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 31, No. 4, 2020, pp. 91-105.

a «democratura», namely an intermediate political form, midway between democracy and dictatorship.

In Sri Lanka, regulations passed in response to COVID-19 had a significant impact on the freedom of religious belief in the country. As Shamara Wettimuny points out, during the pandemic, the Sri Lankan government implemented a policy of forced cremations for Muslims and Christians who died of COVID-19. This was done in total defiance of Muslim religious beliefs, which prohibit cremation.

Shifting the focus towards full democracies, here too the impact of the pandemic has been particularly important. In fact, the handling of lockdowns and the perceived ability of governments to deal with pandemic-related issues had significant repercussions on the political destinies of ruling parties. The political trajectories in Japan and South Korea are cases in point. Amidst the substantive disruption caused in Japan by the new coronavirus, the handling of the pandemic proved to be fatal for Prime Minister Shinzō Abe's political destiny. The perfect storm that gathered included the postponement of the Olympic Games, the government's perceived inability to tackle the pandemic and the re-emergence of political scandals. It resulted in Abe's unexpected resignation. Such an abrupt downturn in the political fortunes of the Japanese Prime Minister was inextricably interlinked to the consequences of the pandemic. As Corey Wallace and Giulio Pugliese highlight in their article, «COVID-19 clearly played a role in hastening Abe's premature departure by depriving him of the economic, diplomatic, and political tools that had hitherto sustained his administration».

A completely different trajectory is the one that took place in South Korea. As Marco Milani shows in his contribution, the experience accumulated from other epidemics at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century proved crucial in helping the South Korean government respond promptly and effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic. Such successful handling of the outbreak led to a landslide victory for President Moon Jae-in's party at the legislative elections in April 2020. They saw the highest turnout since 1992, which is all the more remarkable, given the social distancing measures in place for the elections.

Still dealing with the evolution of full democracies in the year under review, the case of Timor-Leste must be recalled. During the whole of 2020 the pandemic appeared to have been successfully contained, as proved by the fact that the country ended the year without a single fatality. Nonetheless, as argued by Rui Feijó in his article in this volume – the impact of the pandemic was severe on other fronts. It played a role in the realignment of the political forces that sustained the government. This, in turn, brought about the political marginalization of Xanana Gusmão, the charismatic leader of the anti-Indonesian resistance, hitherto a key player in Timor-Leste's power system. Also, the pandemic negatively impacted on the economy, causing GDP to contract by almost 7%.

From the perspective of domestic policies, the divide between fully fledged democracies and countries drifting towards more authoritarian tendencies was the key feature that characterized the year 2020. Internationally, the defining feature was the increasingly conflictual US-China relationship. The ties between the two major global powers, which in a way appear to be quintessential examples of a democracy and an authoritarian country respectively, further deteriorated during the year under examination. This happened despite the false dawn represented by some positive steps towards a cooling off of the ongoing US-China trade war, made at the beginning of the year under review. When US President Donald Trump and Chinese Vice Premier Liu signed a phase one trade deal on 15 January 2020, there were hopes that it could represent a starting point towards a less tense relationship.<sup>10</sup> Even so, any hopes of improvement in bilateral ties between the two countries quickly disappeared as a consequence of the advent of COVID-19.<sup>11</sup> The US President called COVID-19 the «China virus» and harshly criticized Beijing for its alleged lack of transparency about the origin of the virus and for not having shared the information about the outbreak in a timely fashion. China, for its part, fought back by accusing the US military of bringing the virus to China during a sporting competition the previous October.<sup>12</sup>

More generally, Beijing reacted to Trump's accusations by putting in place a high profile and sustained public diplomacy effort, which involved its government, businesses, and diasporas in what was dubbed as «mask diplomacy».<sup>13</sup> Aimed at promoting an image of a responsible power, the Chinese Communist Party very forcefully pushed a narrative that presented its efforts in tackling the virus as transparent and effective. While these efforts were aimed at projecting a positive image abroad, Francesca Congiu notes in her analysis that «around the pandemic discourse, there has been a huge effort to control public opinion through a strong policy of censorship sided by the skilful construction of an official narrative». It was an effort aimed «to preserve the legitimacy of the Chinese leadership, at stake with the emergence of the virus in Wuhan».

10. 'Trump Signs China Trade Deal, Putting Economic Conflict on Pause', *The New York Times*, 15 January 2020.

11. 'What's in the U.S.-China Phase 1 trade deal', *Reuters*, 15 January 2020. As part of the trade deal, the US agreed to reduce some of the tariffs on Chinese goods, while China committed to buying US\$ 200 billion's worth of US goods, and to improve intellectual property protection and address forced technology transfers for companies doing business in China. Prior to the agreement, the US also agreed to remove China from its list of currency manipulators.

12. Steven Lee Meyers, 'China Spins Tale That the U.S. Army Started the Coronavirus Epidemic', *The New York Times*, 13 March 2020.

13. Alicia Chen & Vanessa Molter, 'Mask Diplomacy: Chinese Narratives in the COVID Era', *Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies*, 16 June 2020.



The deterioration of US-China relations also had important regional implications, especially for India. Washington's relations with New Delhi in 2020 started with Trump's visit to the Indian capital for a meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.<sup>14</sup> While the results of the meeting were modest,<sup>15</sup> New Delhi's progressive shift towards Washington and away from its self-declared policy of non-alignment was increasingly visible. As argued by Michelguglielmo Torri, although the contraction of India's strategic autonomy is a long-drawn process, which began in 2005 and has continued ever since, its acceleration during Modi's premiership has become particularly marked. No doubt, the Sino-Indian confrontation that began in May 2020 in Ladakh contributed to this acceleration, by inducing New Delhi to move closer to Washington.

It is worth stressing that during Trump's presidency, the increasing US-India closeness came to be characterized not so much by a tighter economic connection – which, in fact, has stagnated – but by an increasingly relevant strategic and military connection, clearly aimed at China. From this viewpoint, it comes as no surprise that New Delhi, having hesitated for years, in 2020 showed an increased interest in participating in «the Quad», a multilateral organization including Australia, Japan, India, and the US, which, once again, is aimed at China. While in the past India was reluctant to join in for fear of provoking China, in October 2020 the Indian Foreign Minister joined a foreign ministers' gathering of the group to explore opportunities of future cooperation.<sup>16</sup> During the same month, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and US Secretary of Defence Mark Esper made an official visit to India to sign an agreement on sharing military satellite information.<sup>17</sup> This, as shown in the current and previous Asia Maior volumes, was one of a series of US-India military agreements that have become the backbone of the increasingly militarized connection between the two countries.



Summing up, 2020 was – in Asia as in the remainder of the world – a year of deep crisis, when people and socio-political systems were brutally impacted by a pandemic of Biblical proportions. The pandemic sledgehammer then worsened a series of pre-existing crises and left a free hand to authoritarian parties or political leaders. The negative socio-political outcomes of the pandemic are unlikely to be overcome any time soon. But this concerns the

14. 'Namaste Trump': India welcomes US president at Modi rally, *The Guardian*, 24 February 2020.

15. 'What did the Trump-Modi «bromance» achieve?', *BBC News*, 25 February 2020.

16. 'Jaishankar at Quad meet: India committed to respecting territorial integrity', *The Indian Express*, 6 October 2020.

17. 'India, U.S. Clinch Defence Pact on Satellite Data as Pompeo, Esper Hold Talks', *Reuters*, 26 October 2020.

future, a terrain this journal programmatically avoids venturing into. Here at the end of this brief introduction – which hardly does justice to the richness of the themes dealt with in the 19 articles that make up this volume – a note of optimism is, nevertheless, in order. Towards the end of the year under examination, while a number of countries were dealing with the second wave of infections, hope was offered by science. Only 10 months after the genetic sequence of the COVID-19 was shared, a number of vaccines were being approved for public use and distribution. Also, Joe Biden's victory over Donald Trump at the US presidential election in November opened the possibility that a less erratic US policy in the world at large and in Asia in particular would take shape. As the new year began, so too did the belief in a better future.

Filippo Boni