

Coronavirus and democracy in Southeast Asia

Friday 3 April 2020, by [GOMEZ James](#), [RAMCHARAN Robin](#) (Date first published: 1 April 2020).

In Southeast Asia, as the health crisis escalates and countries go into different variations of a lockdown, it is affording regimes with authoritarian tendencies the opportunity to suppress political expression, enforce strict obedience and consolidate their rule. Unless this is called out and actions taken to address these measures, a post-Covid-19 Southeast Asia will put democracy on the backfoot in the region.

The coronavirus crisis, which originated in China late 2019, has spread globally. As of yesterday, the number of Covid-19 confirmed cases around the world reached 786,000, with 37,800 dead and 116,000 recovered. Citizens fear that the national lockdowns, such as in Italy, are coming to Asia starting with India. While attention has been focused on job losses and the economy, it is important to point out that democracy is also at a risk.

Since the middle of last month, Southeast Asian countries have been experiencing an exponential rise in Covid-19 related infections and deaths. To flatten the coronavirus curve, governments have introduced a range of restrictions on travel including closing borders, banned or limited numbers in public and private gatherings, introduced social distancing, prevented people movement and introduced lockdowns, preventing resident population mobility and assembly.

Although this has the support of the general public, the worry is some governments in Southeast Asia are simultaneously taking political advantage of the situation. Measures are being imposed at politically sensitive times that impact the timing of elections and post-elections transitions giving authoritarian regimes the opportunity to extend their reign or make a comeback.

Criticisms of the regimes' mishandling of the health crisis are met with a harsh response or are dismissed as fake news. In other situations the authoritarian regimes position themselves as the competent authority to manage the crisis and implement lockdowns thereby boosting their image in the public's eye. All of this is achieved by curbing freedom of expression and assembly, rights vital for democracy.

On Thursday, Thailand declared a state of emergency to address the health crisis. However, the ban on public gatherings is a convenient measure that stifles the opposition and their reform agenda for a country. Massive protests across university campuses which erupted after the new Future Forward Party was disbanded in January 2020 were the outcome of serious rumblings of discontentment among the youth. Now, the bans on large gatherings will effectively quash this momentum. Free expression by media outlets can be curtailed under this state of emergency should the government decide to censor criticism.

Similarly, in the Philippines, on March 24, President Rodrigo Duterte was granted emergency powers to combat Covid-19. This has become for concern given his propensity for authoritarianism. Congress has wisely extracted provisions from the draft bill that would allow for excessive use of such powers, which critics fear. However, Mr Duterte's track record on abusing human rights does not breed confidence.

In Cambodia, Covid-19 has given Prime Minister Hun Sen the opportunity to announce he is exploring using Article 22 of the constitution to put the country in a state of emergency. Meanwhile, ordinary Cambodians and opposition activists have been arrested for sharing their concerns about the virus over social media.

In Malaysia, the elected government of 2018, collapsed in January this year, resulting in the re-emergence of the corruption-plagued old guard anchored by the United Malays National Organisation (Umno) that had run the country for six decades. In the political tussle over whether the “back-door” government has sufficient support in parliament, the usurpers to date have been able to side-step this question by delaying the sitting of parliament and directing attention to containing the coronavirus. Presently, Malaysia’s Movement Control Order, which was initially implemented until March 31, was extended to April 14. This affords the Umno-supported old guard crucial time to consolidate power as large political gatherings are forbidden for people-led pressures against this back-door government.

Singapore elections have to be held latest April 21, 2021. Following the release of the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee report on March 13, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of the People’s Action Party the next day said the city-state could either hold elections early or wait for things to stabilise. Since then, opposition parties have been making public statements that it would be irresponsible to hold an election during this period of pandemic. Opposition parties, in particular, are concerned that the ruling party might introduce measures to limit campaign activities and gatherings at rallies thereby impacting their political chances.

Myanmar officially reported its first two Covid-19 cases on March 23. While it is seen as too early to predict a re-timing of the elections scheduled for November this year, the country’s immediate concerns centre on returning migrant workers across the border from Thailand and the movement of people internally. This offers the junta a pole position as the force to implement movement orders, offer up its doctors to support medical aid and demonstrate proactive action to cancel large scale military related activities. In this way, the junta can shore up its image and political position in the run up to the polls. This will make it hard for Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy to attain the 75% sweep of seats in parliament to make constitutional amendments and to do away with the military’s 25% of seats in parliament.

In Indonesia, as the number of cases increases daily, critics claim that the government has not been transparent and has been slow in responding. Mishandling of the crisis and incantations of “prayer” as a preventive tool are set to impact the democratic credibility of Jokowi’s administration, which narrowly won elections in 2019 against military-friendly forces.

In Vietnam, lockdowns of affected areas around Hanoi have been implemented. As Vietnam chairs Asean this year, the annual civil society gathering scheduled for October, the Asean People’s Forum, is likely to be postponed or held in an abridged version.

Laos recorded its first cases in late March and has announced its looking to China for examples for its control measures. Perhaps bringing full circle into the spotlight the increasingly positive view in parts of Southeast Asia of the authoritarian approach of China to the coronavirus outbreak that started in Wuhan.

The Covid-19 health emergency offers an opportunity to the Communist Party of China to promote its governance model abroad by positioning its actions as swift and effective. Although the measures taken are viewed as heavy-handed, the key message China wants to promote is that it can implement unpopular and difficult policies while Western democracies cannot, putting their citizens’ lives at risk. As a result, authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia have another reason to question the value

of democracy.

To ensure that states' uphold the protection of democracy, civil society, the media and the international community must closely monitor the machinations of authoritarian regimes and the sleight of hand to exploit Covid-19 containment measures for political advantage. If this happens, these authoritarian regimes will have a chance to entrench and stretch the duration of their regimes. This will be the democratic fallout of the coronavirus crisis.

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All about Coronavirus on this website

The Covid-19 pandemic has generated interlocking crises at multiple levels. ESSF is providing thematic and geographic coverage in English and French.

View all articles using keyword [Coronavirus/Covid-19 \(EN\)](#). To display English and French articles, use [Coronavirus / Covid-19 \(EN, FR\)](#).

Our regional and country pages include articles on labour and community struggles, the abuse of emergency powers and other topics. Use the continent tabs at the top of the page to find the country or group of countries that interests you.

Public health issues are mostly in country-specific health/epidemic pages ([European Union](#), [Great Britain](#), [France](#), [USA](#), [Pakistan](#), [India](#), [Philippines](#), [Malaysia](#), etc.) This page presents a selection of articles of regional or global relevance.

We have also selected a few articles with a global [political](#) analysis, as well as a few articles tracking the emergence of global progressive [movements](#) related to the pandemic.

We are increasing our coverage of left parties' and movements' declarations and proposals. See for example these pages for the [European Union](#) countries.

ESSF is raising funds for the [Labour Relief Campaign in Pakistan](#) which supports workers and families impacted by the pandemic. We will announce other solidarity initiatives in the coming days and weeks.

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