

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

Guarding Democratic Values: South Korea's Successful Fight against the Coronavirus

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South Korea's Impressive COVID-19 Crisis Management

Aggressive testing by public health authorities, efficient contact tracing utilizing the country's advanced IT infrastructure, and physical distancing campaigns are all credited for making South Korea's fight against COVID-19 so successful. The country's successful flattening of the virus curve has drawn international attention.¹ South Korea is currently working on sharing its quarantine model with other countries.² The country's first confirmed patient of this deadly virus was reported on January 20. The number of patients remained very low until mid-February, when the city of Daegu became South Korea's epicenter. The curve of infections peaked in early March and began to flatten in late March. As of May 13, South Korea has reported a total of 10,962 confirmed cases, with 1,008 currently in isolation and a death toll of 259.³ Thanks to this impressive health crisis management, President Moon Jae-in's once declining approval rate rose sharply and his party won a landslide victory in the April 15 parliamentary elections.

This successful crisis management of COVID-19 has been praised by American media and public officials, including U.S. President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. The reason is obvious. While the Chinese government boasts of its relatively quick "ending" of COVID-19 using draconian lockdown measures, the Korean case is applauded as an alternative democratic model. For example, *Washington Post* columnist Josh Rogin wrote that South Korea has shown that democracies are better suited to protect public health by focusing on transparency and openness in contrast to Beijing's pattern of distortion and distraction.⁴ It is true that illiberal democracies are centralizing power while closing democratic space.⁵ For example, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has used the coronavirus to strengthen his authoritarian rule. The Chinese government

¹ <https://www.businessinsider.com/south-koreas-coronavirus-curve-timeline-2020-4>;

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xAVolr-_LqY&feature=youtu.be; <https://medium.com/@indica/the-korean-playbook-for-covid-19-translated-c726aa21c0a3>

³ COVID-19, Republic of Korea, <http://ncov.mohw.go.kr/en/>

⁴ Josh Rogin, "South Korea shows that democracies can succeed against the coronavirus," *Washington Post*, March 11, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/03/11/south-korea-shows-that-democracies-can-succeed-against-coronavirus/>

⁵ Frances Z. Brown et al., "How Will the Coronavirus Reshape Democracy and Governance Globally?" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/06/how-will-coronavirus-reshape-democracy-and-governance-globally-pub-81470>

admonished Dr. Lee Wenliang, a whistleblower about the virus when it first emerged, and oppressed opinions that don't adhere to the official party line.

Liberal democracies are not free from the risk of making missteps that can undermine democratic governance. President Emmanuel Macron alluded to the idea that the French constitution gives the president emergency powers, but he withdrew this remark amidst criticism. President Donald Trump tweeted that his constitutional power over the states is “total.”⁶ It is worthwhile to examine the challenges when democracies try to strike a balance between public safety and individual liberty by looking at how South Korea overcame these same challenges.

With 16.1% of the total government budget for 2020, South Korea's Ministry of Health and Welfare (MOHW) spends more than any other ministry. But its health budget remains at just 2.5% while the remainder is used on social welfare programs. Nevertheless, the country's health system is strong, with well-equipped medical facilities and inexpensive medical services readily available under the national health insurance program. After the 2015 MERS outbreak, the government reorganized its disease control system in cooperation with the medical community. In this context, after the RNA sequence of the novel coronavirus was made public on January 10, Korean biotech companies quickly developed COVID-19 test kits by early February and the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) fast-tracked approval.⁷ The MOHW also was innovative in dealing with the excessive demand for masks after some brief initial confusion.⁸

The KCDC has emerged as a trustworthy control tower by informing people about the status of virus outbreaks and clearly explaining what guidelines everyone should follow. Its Director-General, Jeong Eun-kyung, has particularly contributed to building public trust in government with her persuasive posture and professional expertise. The KCDC's daily briefings have been accepted as a reliable source information that leaves no room for political interpretation. Considering the divided politics that have invited controversy in government crisis management in the past, delegating much of the public authority to the KCDC was a wise move. Now, politicians are in favor of promoting the KCDC as an independent agency from its current status as part of the MOHW.

Worthwhile Health Crisis Governance Issues for Democracies

The South Korean government's policy on movement restrictions was not welcomed by the public initially. One controversial issue has been travel bans. The government evacuated Koreans from Wuhan City after the WHO's official announcement on January 30 that COVID-19 was a global health emergency. The government then banned travelers from Hubei Province, where Wuhan is located, on February 4. As other East Asian countries like Taiwan and Singapore introduced bans on travel from anywhere in mainland China, this limited travel ban became

⁶ Constanze Stelzenmuller, “Coronavirus is also a threat to democratic institutions,” April 15, 2020, Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/04/15/coronavirus-is-also-a-threat-to-democratic-constitutions>

⁷ “South Korea Listened to the Experts,” CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/07/opinions/terence-kealey-south-korea-listened-to-the-experts/index.html>

⁸ Manufacturers could not provide enough masks to consumers due to excessive demand. Masks were difficult to buy even at a higher price. After the government introduced a temporary mask export ban and appointed designated days for members of the public to purchase masks in pharmacies according to the last digit of the year they were born, long queues to buy masks disappeared in April.

a target for criticism. Opposition politicians attacked President Moon for kowtowing to Xi Jinping to preserve the possibility of an official visit to South Korea later this year. Public opinion was also negative for two reasons. First, some believed that the outbreak in Daegu City could have been prevented if a travel ban for all of mainland China had been introduced earlier. Second, some people did not agree with the rationale of continuing to allow the entry of travelers to sustain the economy even as numerous countries banned travelers from South Korea. But the Moon government has consistently maintained an open-door policy, introducing strict quarantine measures for both Koreans and foreigners entering the country at the end of March. Except for Hubei Province, Korea did not introduce any travel bans, although the government did eventually stop allowing visa-free travel from countries that had enacted bans on Korean travelers⁹. Among OECD countries, only South Korea and the UK have kept an essentially open international travel policy in containing COVID-19 so far.

Korea's open containment policy is further highlighted by the handling of Daegu City, South Korea's COVID-19 epicenter. As the number of infected people in the city began to skyrocket in late February, a ruling party spokesperson suggested locking the city down. This idea immediately drew wide criticism and he stepped down from his position. Keeping the city open is viewed as a politically sensitive issue—the city has been the stronghold of conservative politicians for decades, including the former President Park Geun-hye, who was impeached.

The secret of Korea's successful containment of the virus outbreak also lies in the public's voluntary compliance with social distancing. The South Korean government initially launched a four-week social distancing campaign until April 19 and then extended it to May 5. The campaign encouraged the cancellation of events with large numbers of attendees. Schooling and church services moved online, while companies were encouraged to implement work from home when possible. Shops and restaurants have stayed open except for a temporary closure of entertainment clubs and room salons. Since the enforcement of this campaign has been essentially voluntary, it could not have been successful without the cooperation of civil society. The biggest experiment in social distancing was the parliamentary election held on April 15. More than a quarter of voters cast their ballots during two days of pre-election day voting, which were instituted to distribute the number of voters over a period of several days and avoid crowding. Voters, all wearing masks, lined up six feet apart and had their temperatures taken before they entered the voting booth. Special booths were set up for those who had a fever, and the booths were thoroughly disinfected after each use. Voters in self-isolation during the elections were permitted to go vote during a special limited time period after regular voting had closed for the day. The idea of postponing the election was never seriously debated, since carrying out an election on its scheduled date is viewed as such a fundamental component of democracy by South Koreans.

One issue South Koreans need to pay heed to is striking the right balance between surveillance and privacy. People confirmed to have contracted the coronavirus are tracked by the GPS in their smartphones, and a record of their movements is sent to the smartphones of everyone nearby as an emergency alert. These people are identified by numbers rather than names. But, there is no question that this system is invasive. Stricter surveillance is applied to people who are self-isolating, usually at home, following a possible exposure. Their compliance with quarantine is monitored by their smartphone GPS, and a supervising officer calls several times a day to check

⁹ <http://www.donga.com/en/article/all/20200409/2033366/1/S-Korea-belatedly-imposes-travel-ban-on-88-countries>

whether they are really at their residence. After several instances of people cheating or violating this surveillance rule, the idea of having those in quarantine wear wrist band monitors entered the policy debate. Civic groups have protested that this measure would harm the privacy and human rights of individuals. The health authority compromised, agreeing to implement wrist band monitors only when people who have already violated the self-isolation rules once consent to do so.

The recent episode of popular attacks against sexual minorities deserves special attention. Following multiple days of zero new domestic cases, the government relaxed its physical distancing campaign on May 6. However, a young man who visited several clubs in the Itaewon district in Seoul during a long public holiday in early May was diagnosed just after the social distancing campaign ended, and turned out to be another super-spreader. Young men and women with active social lives can become silent virus disseminators. Several of the clubs that this particular young man visited were identified as gay clubs, and he was outed as a homosexual and has faced personal attacks in digital spaces ever since. Many other patrons of these clubs who might have been infected through this Itaewon link remain fearful of being tested for the virus as they don't wish to be involuntarily outed and face the harsh social stigma that remains pervasive in South Korea against sexual minorities. The number of those who have been infected through the Itaewon clubs is approaching 119 as of May 13, and the planned re-opening of schools has been delayed. Public anger over the resurgence of COVID-19 cases has led to harsh criticism of gay people online as being irresponsible about public safety. In an attempt to quell the fears of people who may have been exposed and encourage everyone to get tested, the government has increased penalties for anyone who does not come forward and also made it possible for residents to be tested by only providing their phone number and not their name.

Searching for the Right Balance between Public Safety and Individual Privacy

South Korea deserves a huge amount of credit for managing the coronavirus crisis democratically. The government has constantly maintained an open disease containment policy both domestically and internationally. It has provided information about the spread of COVID-19 transparently and offered reliable and consistent guidelines. Its collaboration with biotech companies was critical in producing large numbers of test kits for use. South Korean civil society has actively participated in the social distancing campaign critical in mitigating the spread of COVID in the community. Without public trust in government, their voluntary compliance would not be possible.

Balancing the responsibility of the government to conduct surveillance with the value of individual privacy rights is not an easy task during an unprecedented health crisis like this. Nevertheless, some measures for tracking the infected disproportionately discount individual rights. Popular attacks against the gay community should be stopped in particular. This issue must be addressed by all democracies since this liberal value of individual rights is the crucial criteria that distinguishes democratic health governance from authoritarian health governance. In addition, all democratic governments must relinquish their enforcement power once the crisis has ended. As people will rely more on the government during the economic recovery phase, civil society groups should act as a check against centralized administrative power to ensure that it is not abused or misused.

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The East Asia Institute takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the Korean government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

This program was funded in part by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

"Guarding Democratic Values: South Korea's Successful Fight against the Coronavirus"
979-11-90315-78-4 95340 Date of Issue: 19 May 2020

Typeset by Jinkyung Baek

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