

[Working Paper Series: Pandemic Crisis and Democratic Governance in Asia – Part I]

Japan's COVID Responses: Democratic Measures but Weak Transparency

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Introduction¹

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Asia experienced the most prominent decline in liberal democracy of any region in the world. With extreme restrictions on freedom of movement through strict lockdown measures, repression of media freedom under the guise of combatting fake news and cracking down on criticism of the government, the decline of liberal democracy that we have observed over the past fifteen years has accelerated rapidly.

Among Asian countries, the crisis of democracy is most pronounced in South and Southeast Asia,² while the Northeast Asian region has remained relatively stable. South Korea and Taiwan, in particular, have gained international respect for their democratic COVID-19 measures. The South Korean government implemented a COVID tracing system that, while not entirely problem-free, recognizes privacy rights and became a model for combatting COVID-19 as a democracy. In the case of Taiwan, there has been a strengthening rather than a decline of democracy, with increased cooperation between the civic tech community and the government.

In terms of damage caused by the pandemic, there is a difference between the democratic countries in the subregions of Northeast Asia and Southeast/South Asia. India, Indonesia, and the Philippines, countries that have sought to contain COVID-19 by undermining democracy (by, for instance, enacting anti-fake-news laws to restrict media freedom and making examples of lockdown violators through inhumane treatment), have the highest number of COVID-19 cases in Asia. By contrast, Taiwan and South Korea, which implemented democratic COVID-19 control measures, succeeded in restraining the pandemic to a significant degree.

This observation suggests that the degree of compliance with democratic processes may be correlated with the effectiveness of COVID-19 countermeasures. Such seems to be the case in other parts of the world as well: while countries with populist political leaders such as the United States, Brazil, and India have the highest

¹ Throughout the year, ADRN members will publish a total of three versions of the Pandemic Crisis and Democratic Governance in Asia Research to include any changes and updates in order to present timely information. The first and second part will be publicized as a working paper and the third will be publicized as a special report. This working paper is part I of the research project.

² Joshua Kurtlantzick, "Addressing the Effect of COVID-19 on Democracy in South and Southeast Asia," *Council on Foreign Relations Discussion Paper* (November 2020). https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/dpkurlantzick-front-and-back-cover_final_0.pdf

number of COVID-19 cases, democracies with non-populist political leaders and high levels of trust in government such as Australia, Finland, Norway, and New Zealand have controlled the pandemic successfully.³

Looking at Northeast Asia, it can be said that that Japan, like South Korea and Taiwan, is a democracy where populism is relatively well contained. However, unlike Taiwan and South Korea, Japan has not been internationally recognized for its COVID-19 response. This is because although Japan's COVID countermeasures are relatively democratic, the government has not won the trust of the public due to the lack of transparency in the information distributed.

COVID-19 Cases in Japan

Japan was hit by the virus early on, with the first case discovered on January 15, 2020, followed by a mass outbreak on the cruise ship Diamond Princess. However, infections and deaths due to COVID-19 have been well controlled compared to other developed democracies. As of January 20, 2021, the death toll per million people in Japan was 37, compared to 1,769 in Belgium, 1,385 in Italy, and 1,370 in the United Kingdom.⁴

The relatively small number of COVID-19 cases in Japan was the result of contact-avoidance measures that were followed by the citizens. According to a survey conducted by Muto et al., at the end of March 2020, more than 80% of the 11,342 people surveyed avoided closed spaces, 86.8% refrained from mass gatherings, and 86.3% of respondents reported frequent hand washing. Wearing a mask at all times was also reported by 70.1% of respondents (Table 1). A March 2020 survey by Gallup International Association (GIA), an association of polling organizations, similarly found that 70% of respondents reported wearing a medical mask.⁵ This was in contrast with the behavior of Europeans who, in the middle of the serious COVID outbreak, did not fully observe these contact-avoidance measures. Only 44% of Italian respondents and 5% of UK respondents gave the same answers as the Japanese respondents in the GIA survey.⁶

³ Sebastian Strangio, "The Riddle of COVID-19 and Democracy in Southeast Asia," *The Diplomat* (September 22, 2020). <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/the-riddle-of-covid-19-and-democracy-in-southeast-asia/?fbclid=IwAR0uA86wbYLMgE7M8fPY1Gby-QITXsH9asILDq0NscsNQOizLm4K9t0EF2Y>; Joshua Keating, "The Pandemic Threatened Global Democracy. Instead, It's Strengthened It," *SLATE* (October 30, 2020). <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/10/covid-democracy-threat-stronger.html?fbclid=IwAR0uA86wbYLMgE7M8fPY1Gby-QITXsH9asILDq0NscsNQOizLm4K9t0EF2Y>; Robin Niblett and Leslie Vinjamuri, "Op-Ed: Why Democracies Do Better at Surviving Pandemics," *Los Angeles Times* (May 26, 2020). https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-05-26/democracies-autocracies-coronavirus-pandemic-response?fbclid=IwAR3YNw2SI6roSixTbPSRx17UM1ji81Y2UxAWbs_EZJZsxq56emO8MjQ_xsI

⁴ "Daily New Cases in Japan" in World Meter (January 21, 2021, 01:49 GMT). <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/japan/>

⁵ Gallup International Association, "The Coronavirus: A Vast Scared Majority Around the World," (2020 March), p. 6. https://www.gallup-international.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/GIA_SnapPoll_2020_COVID_Tables_final.pdf

⁶ *Ibid.*

Table 1. Contact-Avoidance Measures Taken in Japan

Measures	Percentage
Avoid closed spaces with poor ventilation	80.6
Avoid crowded places with many people nearby	80.5
Avoid close-contact settings such as close-range conversations	57.0
Avoid places where items 1-3 above overlap (3 Cs)	80.6
Do not go to mass gatherings	86.8
Undertake frequent handwashing	86.3
Undertake cough etiquette (use handkerchief or sleeve instead of hands)	77.0
Always wear a surgical-style mask when going out	70.1
Avoid going out when you have a cold	76.7
Get sufficient rest and sleep	73.1
Eat a nutritious diet	69.5
Prepare consultation and transportation methods for when you feel ill	41.5

Source: Muto et al., op. cit., p. 7⁷

However, as it has been found that physical vulnerability to COVID-19 might differ depending on race, it may be more appropriate to compare Japan with other racially similar Asian countries, than with Western countries. When compared to other Asian countries, Japan performs neither particularly well nor poorly in containing the virus. As of January 20, 2021, the number of infected people per million in Japan was 2,691, ranking 22nd among the 50 Asian countries according to Worldometer, a data aggregation site. The third wave, which began in November 2020, vastly increased the number of cases in Japan compared to other countries. Compared to Taiwan and South Korea, the number of infected people and deaths relative to the population is higher in Japan (Table 2).

Table 2. COVID-19 Cases and Deaths in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan

Country	Total Cases	Total Deaths	Tot Cases/ 1M pop	Deaths/ 1M pop
Japan	339,774	4,647	2,691	37
South Korea	73,518	1,300	1,433	25
Taiwan	870	7	36	0.3

Source: "Daily New Cases in Japan" in Worldometer (January 20, 2021, 23:38 GMT)⁸.

⁷ Kaori Muto et al., "Japanese Citizens' Behavioral Changes and Preparedness against COVID-19: An Online Survey during the Early Phase of the Pandemic," *PLoS ONE*, Vol. 15, No.6 (2020), p. 7.
<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0234292>

⁸ Daily New Cases in Japan. Worldometer, January 21, 2021 (Accessed: January 20,2021)
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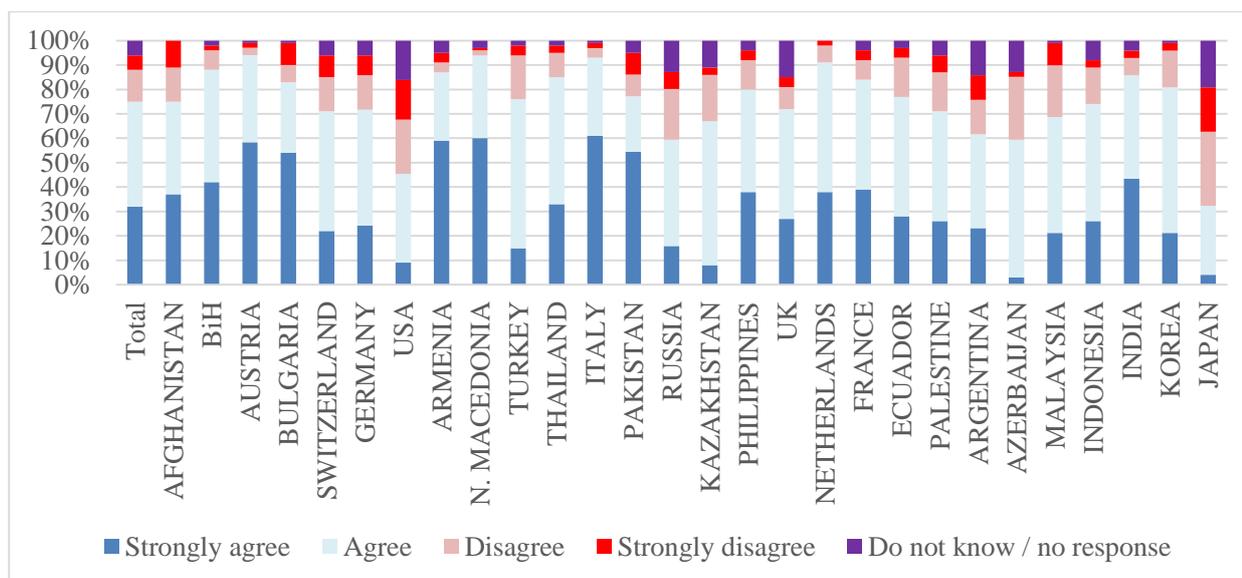
Avoidance of Extreme Restrictions on Civil Liberties

While Japan's control of the pandemic itself does not stand out, when it comes to abiding by democratic rules, Japan's pandemic responses rank high in the region as the government's measures have been strictly based on the rule of law. Japan took very careful measures in respect to human rights based on the Act on Special Measures for Pandemic Influenza and New Infectious Diseases Preparedness and Response, which stipulates that actions should be taken only within the scope of the law and that restrictions on basic human rights should be the bare minimum. When Prime Minister Shinzo Abe declared a state of emergency on April 7, 2020 in response to the spread of coronavirus in Japan, he clarified the implementation period and target areas, and outlined the state of emergency after consulting with experts in accordance with the Act. The Act stipulates the period of implementation to be no longer than two years, and the actual period of implementation set by the Japanese government was one month. After an extension of about three weeks, the state of emergency was lifted by the end of May based on the decrease of COVID-19 cases. While a large number of countries saw the enactment of anti-fake-news laws which could have been utilized for media control, no such law was created in Japan.

The Japanese government's declaration of a state of emergency was not intended to lock down cities, but merely to request the citizens to refrain from going out. Even though the national government has the authority to advise and recommend specific restrictions or actions to prefectural governors, mayors, and ward mayors, it refrained from issuing forceful commands to local governments.⁹ While other Asian democracies such as South Korea and India went so far as to allow some degree of violation of privacy in their IT-based COVID-19 tracking system, Japan hesitated to do so. A bluetooth tracing system named COCOA was introduced on June 19, 2020, but the Japanese government did not loudly encourage widespread installation of this system.

Such measures were in line with the politico-cultural attitude of Japan. There were some calls for the government to implement stricter measures against COVID-19, based on the Confucian culture which assumes a vertical relationship between the government and the general public. Taiwan and South Korea, two Northeast Asian democracies with similar cultural backgrounds, implemented relatively strict measures compared to Western countries, such as penalties against COVID patients who violated self-isolation regulations. South Korea's tracking was designed to allow the authority to access and publish personal information, including a greater than necessary amount of personal information on COVID patients. However, Japan's longer history as a democracy, combined with its previous experience of serious restrictions on civil liberties during the two world wars, made the Japanese strongly averse to restrictions on civil liberties. When GIA questioned whether the respondents would be willing to sacrifice some of their human rights if it helps prevent the spread of the virus, only 32% of Japanese respondents agreed (4% strongly agree and 28% agree). This was in striking contrast to other Asian countries: the combined percentage of strongly agree and agree went from as low as 69% in Malaysia to as high as 85% in India and Thailand. The number in Japan was by far the lowest among all the countries surveyed (Figure 1). Any approach that excessively restricts civil liberties is likely to reduce the rate of support for the government and be fatal to the survival of the administration. Thus, no such measures were taken.

⁹ Harukata Takenaka, *Politics of Corona Crisis: Abe Administration vs. Mayors* [in Japanese] (Tokyo: Chuo koron sha, 2020), pp. 36–37.

Figure 1. Willingness to Sacrifice Their Own Human Rights for COVID Prevention

Source: Gallup International Association (March 2020) ¹⁰

Trust in the Government

In order to combat pandemics, which are highly infectious and cannot be visually confirmed, it is necessary to prevent infection of oneself and others through individual preventive actions such as wearing masks, washing hands, gargling, and maintaining social distance. Research on existing infectious disease control measures, such as H1N1 and Ebola, has shown that citizens need to have trust in government in order for them to respond to government mandates.¹¹ Similar results have been found for coronavirus in existing studies.¹²

Against the current backdrop, it is difficult to say that the Japanese government's COVID-19 countermeasures have won the trust of the public. According to a survey conducted by Muto et al. in March 2020, governmental sources were not among the most trusted information sources. Table 3 shows the information source preference of Japanese citizens. TV news programs were the most popular source to retrieve COVID-related information (89.0%), followed by Internet news sites (86.6%). In contrast, information from the Prime Minister was used by 66.3% of respondents, information sent from the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare was used by 63.4%, information from the local (prefectural) government was used by 58.0%, and information from the expert

¹⁰ Gallup International Association, "The Coronavirus: A Vast Scared Majority around the World," (2020 March), p.4. https://www.gallup-international.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/GIA_SnapPoll_2020_COVID_Tables_final.pdf

¹¹ Vicki S. Freimuth et al., "Trust during the Early Stages of the 2009 H1N1 Pandemic," *Journal of Health Communication*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (October 10, 2013), pp. 321–339; Michael Siegrist and Alexandra Zingg, "The Role of Public Trust during Pandemics: Implications for Crisis Communication," *European Psychologist*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2014), pp. 23–32; Robert A. Blair, Benjamin S. Morse, and Lily L. Tsai, "Public Health and Public Trust: Survey Evidence from the Ebola Virus Disease Epidemic in Liberia," *Soc Sci Med* (January 2017), pp. 89–97.

¹² Kaori Muto et al., "Japanese Citizens' Behavioral Changes and Preparedness against COVID-19: An Online Survey during the Early Phase of the Pandemic," *PLoS ONE*, Vol. 15, No.6 (2020). <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0234292>; Holly Seale et al., "COVID-19 Is Rapidly Changing: Examining Public Perceptions and Behaviors in Response to this Evolving Pandemic," *PLoS ONE*, Vol. 15, No. 6 (2020). <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0235112>; Jeffrey V. Lazarus et al., "COVID-SCORE: A Global Survey to Assess Public Perceptions of Government Responses to COVID-19 (COVID-SCORE-10)," *PLoS ONE*, Vol. 15, No. 10 (2020). <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0240011>

meeting was used by 56.9% of respondents. Regarding the trustworthiness of information sources, the trustworthiness of the Prime Minister and the central bureaucracy was regarded as particularly low (48.8% and 47.5%, respectively), compared to those who trusted information from local governments and expert meeting (55.6% and 51.4% respectively).

Table 3. Corona-Related Information Sources

Media type	Get information (%)	Trust information (%)
TV news programs	89.0	55.2
TV talk and variety shows	69.4	31.4
Newspapers	42.0	47.5
Tabloid paper	7.9	12.7
Internet news sites	86.6	41.8
SNS app news	45.6	24.5
Information sent by the Prime Minister	66.3	47.5
Information sent by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare	63.4	48.8
Information provided by government Expert Meetings	56.9	51.4
Information sent by local (prefecture) government	58.0	55.6

Source: Muto et al., op. cit., pp. 9–11¹³

Why was there such a low level of trust in the Japanese government on COVID-19 information? Two interrelated factors may have played a role here: unclear scientific evidence and inadequate information disclosure.

Policy and Scientific Evidence Inconsistencies

In order to deal with a problem that has never been experienced before, such as a new type of infectious disease, it is essential to reduce misunderstandings to the greatest extent possible, and to foster public understanding of the government's policies. In the case of the Japanese government however, seemingly inconsistent policies and weak disclosure of the scientific facts on which the policies were formed fostered mistrust of the government.

The Japanese government had warned early on that it was important to reduce human-to-human contact as much as possible in order to control the pandemic and therefore announced the simultaneous closure of schools on February 27, 2020. The declaration of the state of emergency followed on April 7. The regulations were effective, and the number of newly infected people that peaked in mid-April gradually began to decrease.

¹³ Kaori Muto et al., “Japanese Citizens’ Behavioral Changes and Preparedness against COVID-19: An Online Survey during the Early Phase of the Pandemic,” *PLoS ONE*, vol. 15, No.6 (2020), pp.9–11.
<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0234292>

However, as the number of cases increased again leading to the second wave of infection around the end of June, Prime Minister Abe launched what was called the “GO TO” campaign to promote tourism, thus sending conflicting signals. It is important to note that this initiative was passed even though the Subcommittee on Novel Coronavirus Disease Control of the Advisory Council on Countermeasures against Novel Influenza and Other Diseases (hereafter Subcommittee) had called for a review of this tourism promotion campaign in areas where the disease had spread.¹⁴ This is a crucial example in which citizens were given the impression that government policy was not based on scientific evidence. While it is important to minimize economic damage to protect people’s livelihoods while controlling the number of deaths caused by the virus, severe criticism was raised that launching such a campaign in the middle of the second wave would have a negative impact on the economy as well.

Another case of mixed signals was in the field of education. Since the beginning of the academic year 2020, universities have taken the unavoidable step of offering most of their lectures, and especially large ones, online in order to limit the spread of the virus. However, growing dissatisfaction among university students led the government to encourage universities to expand the number of in-person classes, despite still being in the middle of the third wave.¹⁵ The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology took a step further by announcing the percentage of in-person classes being conducted at universities in December, a seemingly punitive action against universities that were limiting their face-to-face classes. The lack of consistency between the call to reduce person-to-person contact and the request to expand in-person classes in the midst of the third wave gave the impression that both were arbitrary decisions.

Weaknesses in Information Disclosure

In addition to policy inconsistencies, inadequate disclosure of information on COVID-19 measures was another reason the government was distrusted. Democracies with successful COVID-19 containment measures, such as Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, and Taiwan, held press conferences almost every day until the coronavirus was under control to increase the public’s trust in the government and to guide the regulations. Japan, on the other hand, did not have a single entity in charge of the pandemic to hold press conferences; instead, multiple actors – Katsunobu Kato (the Minister of Health, Labor and Welfare), Yasutoshi Nishimura (Minister of Economic Revitalization), and Yoshihide Suga (Chief Cabinet Secretary) – held their own press conferences and talked publicly about the pandemic. The nuance sometimes differed between press conferences, resulting in a failure to clearly provide accurate information to the public.¹⁶

From the end of February, the Novel Coronavirus Expert Meeting (hereafter Expert Meeting) started to hold press conferences after recognizing the lack of sufficient and proper official communication with the public. An “association of volunteers,” experts close to the members of the Expert Meeting, began disseminating their

¹⁴ Statement by Shigeru Omi at the Committee on Land, Infrastructure and Transportation of the House of Representatives (July 29, 2020).

¹⁵ “Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Urges ‘Proactive Consideration of Face-to-Face Classes’ in Talks with Four University Groups,” *Nikkei Shimbun* (November 19, 2020).

¹⁶ “True Science Seen in COVID-19: What Politicians and Society Need to Know About Its Use [in Japanese],” *Asahi Shimbun* (August 28, 2020).

research results on the pandemic on the Internet as well,¹⁷ causing confusion around whether or not their information was governmental. As these non-policymakers came to the forefront, it was unclear to the public who was in charge of policymaking regarding the pandemic.

In addition, to eliminate the perception of arbitrariness in policy, it would have been crucial to make the contents of the Expert Meeting open to the public to create an understanding of the basis on which the government was making policy decisions. At the end of May 2020, the Japanese government stated that minutes would be released to the public after the media pointed out the lack of minutes for these meetings. Nevertheless, meeting minutes of neither the Expert Meeting nor the Subcommittee have been disclosed.

Information disclosure has been weak concerning economic stimulus packages as well. The GO TO campaign was outsourced to a private actor through a bidding process, and a contract was signed for 186.6 billion yen. Despite the huge amount of money involved in the project, the contract was assigned to a new network called the Tourism Industry Joint Proposal Body, which does not have a dedicated office and is comprised of travel-related companies and organizations. This caused criticism and public distrust, as the bidding process was closed to the public. The Japan Association of Travel Agents, chaired by the secretary general of the Liberal Democratic Party, Toshihiro Nikai, is one of the constituent entities of the body, which also aroused distrust due to the seeming indication of nepotism.

Similar problems could be observed in the outsourcing of the government's cash transfer project for small and medium enterprises. The contractor for the cash transfer project, the Service Design Promotion Council, was criticized for its nontransparent corporate governance practices, as it has failed to publish its financial statements as required by law since its establishment in 2016. In addition, 97% of the Service Design Promotion Council was subcontracted to Dentsu Inc., a public relations company, which raised the question of why the government did not contract directly with Dentsu Inc. However, it was impossible for the public to compare the Council's bid with those of other bidders as the details of the bid proposal were not disclosed, with the exception of the amount of the Council's bid.¹⁸

Conclusion: Continuity of Weak Transparency and Weak Confidence in the Government

Weak information transparency in the Japanese government is not limited to COVID-19 related measures. During the Abe and the Suga administrations, there have been multiple cases which seem to involve arbitrary decisions of the Prime Minister or people surrounding him. Each time information was not sufficiently disclosed, the public's confidence in the government was eroded.

Abe was nonetheless able to stay in power because his political ideology, which was considered conservative, had the support of nationalists. However, when these nationalist supporters were also hit by the economic fallout of the pandemic, their support for Abe rapidly waned. Yoshihide Suga, Chief Cabinet Secretary during the Abe administration, was appointed as the successor to Abe as Prime Minister in September 2020. However, Suga's approval rating dropped to the 30% range within a few months of taking office, due to the rapid

¹⁷ "Is the Expert Meeting Going Too Far? A Sense of Crisis in the National Response, Proactive Communication [in Japanese]," *Asahi Shimbun* (June 11, 2020).

¹⁸ "Outsourcing Subsidies: The Government should Respond to Doubts," *Asahi Shimbun* (June 5, 2020).

increase of new cases during the third wave, in addition to the fact that he failed to attract nationalist supporters due to his lack of ideology.

It is time to increase government transparency and accountability for the lives of citizens, for the economy, and for democracy in Japan. The government should acknowledge the growing importance of good governance, even more than it normally does. ■

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