

[Working Paper Series: Pandemic Crisis and Democratic Governance in Asia – Part 2]

Crises in Nepal: Rise of the Pandemic and the Rise of Threat to Governance

Pradip Pariyar (Samata Foundation)

Introduction

South Asia has turned into the epicenter of the second wave of COVID-19 as most countries in the region, including India, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Pakistan have been badly infected by the coronavirus. The situation is getting more flared up as each day passes. Of late, the situation in Nepal is gradually becoming alarming as two out of five people are being tested positive.¹

Nepal hardly witnessed any impact during the second wave of COVID-19 until the first week of March this year. The number of new cases was merely 89 with one death on March 8. Ever since then, the situation has rapidly been turning to the worse. With a population of nearly 30 million, infections caused by this pandemic soared up to over 9,000 each day. Calculations show that the total infections were probably closer to 120,000 by the end of May, and there were more than 700 COVID-19 related deaths nationwide.²

The political situation of Nepal took a dramatic turn with the drastic developments in alliances and interest groups. Utilizing various articles from the constitution, the House of Representatives was dissolved for the second time in 4 months while the opposition alliance knocked on the door of the Supreme Court. The verdict is due very soon. The availability of vaccines is uncertain amid the efforts of the Prime Minister to buy popularity and voter sympathy.

Though commitments were made by various countries like the USA and China, the quantity of the vaccines still falls short to vaccinate the vast majority until the election dates.

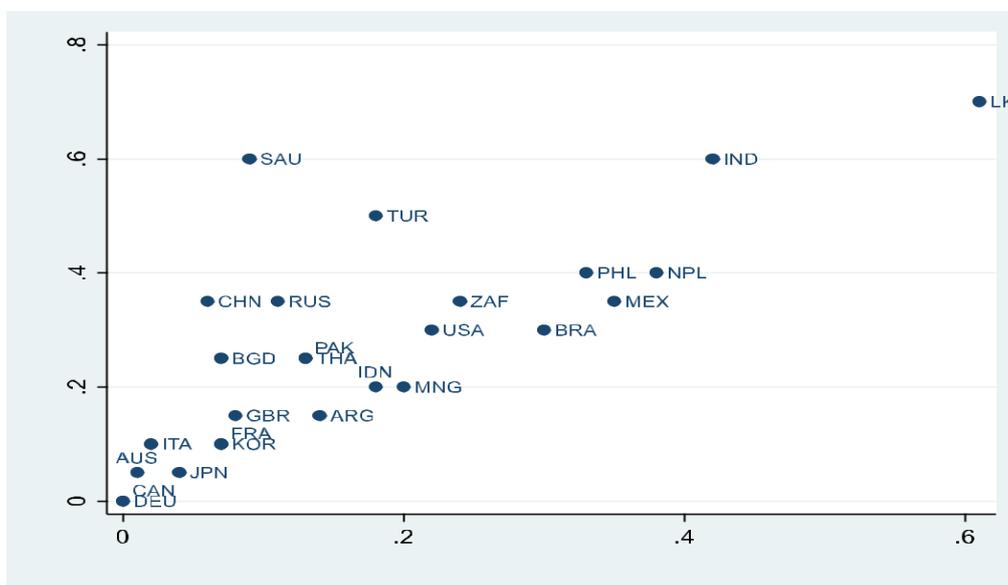
Shrinking Civic Space and Democratic Condition

The government reinforcement of the 'One Door Policy' in April 2019 is still in place. This policy requires interested individuals and NGOs/ INGOs to channel their supplies through the government.³ As the decisions are still enacted, donors have to undergo bureaucratic hurdles and legal formalities that delay aid delivery. (Foundation 2020)

¹ Hari Bansh Jha, "Second Wave of COVID-19 Getting out of Control in Nepal," ORF, accessed June 20, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/second-wave-of-covid-19-getting-out-of-control-in-nepal/>.

² Kaustubh Dhital, "Nepal Covid-19 Impact Worse than Official Figures," Nepali Times, May 30, 2021, <https://www.nepalitimes.com/latest/nepal-covid-19-impact-worse-than-official-figures/>.

³ "Govt Adopts One-Door Policy for Relief Distribution," The Kathmandu Post (The Kathmandu Post), accessed June 20, 2021, <https://kathmandupost.com/miscellaneous/2017/08/15/govt-adopts-one-door-policy-for-relief-distribution>.

Figure 1. Democratic Erosion During the Pandemic Crisis

Source: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/PanDem/>

Figure 1 shows how much a country departs from democratic principles when dealing with COVID-19. The Pandemic Violations of Democratic Standards (Pandem) index capture the extent to which state responses to COVID-19 violate democratic standards for emergency responses. The pandemic backsliding (Panback) index reflects the extent to which such responses pose a risk to the overall quality of democracy within the country. Combined, these two indices provide a snapshot of how COVID-19 emergency responses affect the quality of democracy within the country. Nepal is one of the countries that deviated the most from Pandem and Panback performers in the sample indicating that the democratic standards have been violated to larger extent and poses risk to the overall quality of democracy in Nepal.⁴

The Pandemic has contributed to the decline of the democratic situation in Nepal. An analysis prepared by Jung Kim (2020) shows that the pandemic violations of democratic standards vs pandemic backsliding index positions of Nepal are at a reasonably higher position compared to other nations including its two giant neighbors; China and India.

Various efforts have been made by the government to exploit the democratic situation by disregarding the constitutional institutions. Following various undemocratic bills like NHRC Act (Amendment) Bill, Media Council Bill, Bill on Mass Communication, Information Technology Bill, and measures proposed to register, monitor I/NGO's activities was seen as a method to suppress the voices of the public.⁵ The interim government has continued to pass numerous interim bills after the dissolution of the House of Representatives.

Economic Slump

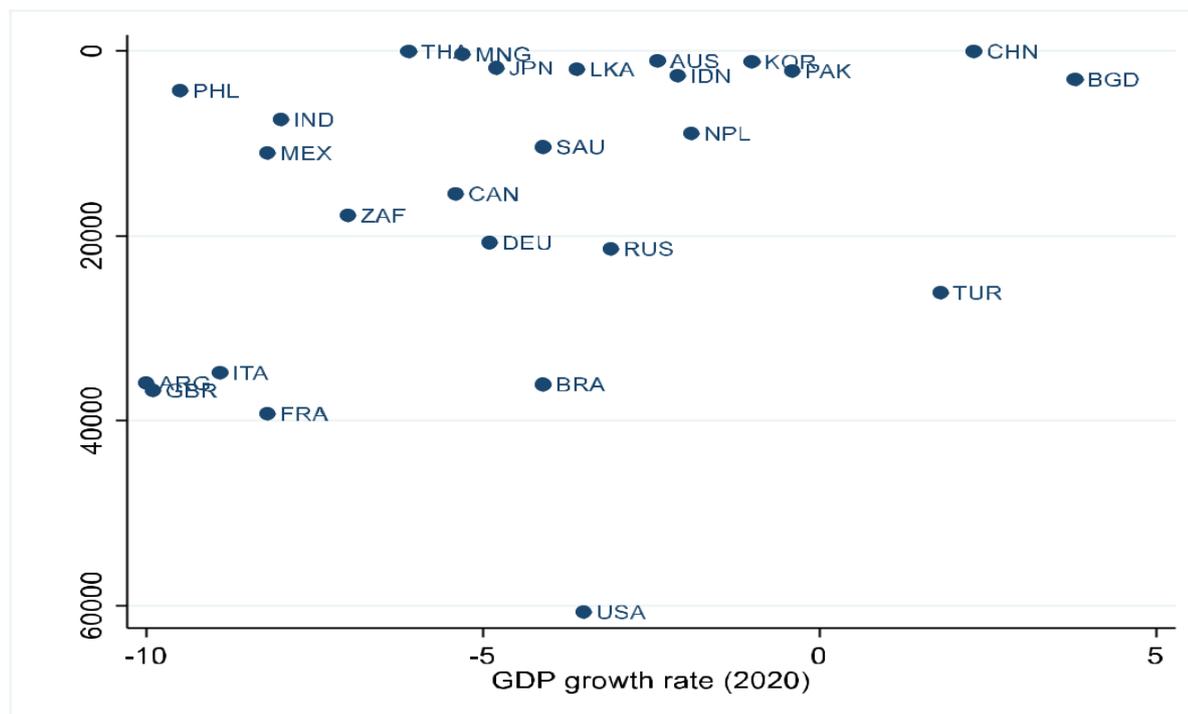
Nepal is currently under tremendous pressure due to the economic crisis, political instability, and second wave of COVID-19 which led to the government enforcing a nationwide lockdown starting from April 28, 2021. The Nepali economy has seen a spillover effect mainly from three fronts—remittance inflow, tourism

⁴ "Global Standards, Local Knowledge," V-DEM, accessed June 20, 2021, <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/PanDem/>.

⁵ "Nepal: Information Technology Bill Threatens Freedom of Expression," Amnesty International, accessed June 20, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/01/nepal-information-technology-bill-threatens-freedom-of-expression/>.

industry, and international trade. Given the nature of the economy—which is based on the service sector and agriculture—the country's tourism industry is suffering immensely. The reduced flow of tourists, restrictions on the entry of citizens from infected countries, and the cancellation of Visit Nepal 2020 (program of national pride led by the government of Nepal) have put the hospitality industry in peril. Statistics show that the occupancy rate in the hotel industry continues to decrease sharply. Reports show that the disease has affected more people economically—either causing them to lose their jobs or making them go bankrupt—than through infection. Nepal's gross domestic product (GDP) is anticipated to grow by 3.1% in fiscal year (FY) 2021 from a contraction of 1.9% in FY2020, according to the Asian Development Outlook (ADO) 2021 and the flagship economic publication of the Asian Development Bank (ADB).⁶

Figure 2. GDP Growth Rate



Source: https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEO

[WORLD/AFG and worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp](https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp) and <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus-testing>

Figure 2 is an extract from the analysis of Jung Kim (2020) that indicates the trade-off between health and the economy in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic. As shown, Nepal was one of the less successful countries in terms of health target measured by total cases per million; Nepal was one of the on-average performers in terms of economy target – GDP growth rate.

Increased Corruption and Loss of Faith Among the General Public

A national survey jointly conducted by Kathmandu University School of Arts, Interdisciplinary Analyst, and Strengthening Local Government surveyed 7,060 respondents randomly selected from 588 wards across the country's seven provinces. The survey reported that 65.6 percent of Nepalis believe that the country is moving in the right direction and they are more optimistic about the country's direction than they were in 2017 and 2018.

⁶ Saloni Murarka, "Pandemic, Political Instability, Economic Crisis Rattles Nepal," WION (WION, May 8, 2021), <https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/pandemic-political-instability-economic-crisis-rattles-nepal-383631>.

The top four reasons for the optimism are better roads (73.8%), improvements in the supply of electricity (46.0%), increases in access to health services (31.8%), and increases in access to education (30.7%). Nepalis also feel that the most pressing problems faced by the country are the increase in corruption, rise in the prices of basic commodities, and hikes in taxes.

According to the survey, about 43.8 percent of respondents said that they do not trust political parties. In contrast, local government bodies have steadily gained the trust of the Nepali people. As much as 84.6 percent of the respondents said that they trust ward chairpersons/members, while 91.8 percent still trust media organizations, followed by 90.7 percent who perceive the community-based organizations as the most trustworthy institutions in the country. The level of faith and confidence the Nepalis place in their municipal/rural and ward chairpersons has increased since 2017, in addition to their trust in the local political leaders, courts, and judicial committees.

While most respondents answered that they do not know about the current tax rates/types, most of those who paid property and land taxes reported an increase in the taxes compared to the previous year. Most Nepalis (98.0%) do not have a clear understanding of taxes or accurate information on the collection and utilization of taxes by the different tiers of government. A small proportion (4.3%) of Nepalis admitted to paying bribes to receive services in 2020. Nepalis mostly pay bribes to obtain official documents, such as acquiring a license or for land-related services.

Poor Research Laboratories, Demotivated Medical Personnel and Vaccines Uncertainties

Resources are limited in a country with poor scientific infrastructures. Hospital beds are fully occupied by COVID-19 patients and therefore it is difficult to admit new patients. Dr. Ajay Thapa, chief of the emergency department at the Grande Hospital, stated that although there were over a dozen seriously ill patients, the hospital could not cater to all of the patients.⁷ As the country is plagued with more and more COVID-19 patients, lack of infrastructures and lack of trained medical personnel add to the trouble of containing pandemic-related issues. Lack of trained manpower capable of performing the molecular biology experiments (e.g. viral RNA extraction and qPCR) required to test for SARS-CoV-2 and interpreting the results is another major limitation in the testing and controlling of COVID-19 in developing countries.⁸

The frontline medical personnel (doctors, nurses, and lab technicians) and other medical personnel involved in sample collection, tracking of COVID-19 patients were supposed to receive 'risk allowance' as instructed by the Ministry of Health and Population. The risk allowance is the incentive given to health workers who are working in the frontline during the pandemic. Health workers who were engaged in setting up quarantine and isolation facilities and providing treatment to COVID-19 patients the previous year say they feel cheated by the authorities.

Giriraj Ghimire, the health unit chief of Rampur Municipality in Palpa, confirmed that none of the frontline workers have received their risk allowances. "The second wave of the pandemic is here and we need health workers to hold the fort. But they haven't been paid last year's dues," Ghimire stated. "This year, it's getting difficult to mobilize workers for the treatment of Covid-19 patients. They are yet to receive last year's risk allowance. The authorities concerned have not said anything regarding the risk allowance for the current fiscal year that begins from July 16." (Post 2021)

The federal government decided to provide risk allowance to health workers who had been mobilized to contain the spread of the virus and provide treatment to coronavirus patients. Following the Cabinet's decision, Rampur Municipality decided to provide 100 percent salary as an allowance to frontline health workers, 75 percent to health workers in the second ring, and 50 percent to other health workers

⁷ Arjun Poudel, "Serious Covid-19 Patients Are Not Getting Hospital Beds," The Kathmandu Post, October 19, 2020, <https://kathmandupost.com/health/2020/10/19/serious-covid-19-patients-are-not-getting-hospital-beds>. (Accessed January 20 2021).

⁸ Giri and Rana, "Charting the challenges behind the testing of COVID-19 in developing countries: Nepal as a case study", June 2020, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2590053620300471>

mobilized for the treatment of COVID-19 patients.

“Most health workers received the allowance for a month only. It is still not clear whether frontline workers will get the risk allowance in the current fiscal year or not,” said Adhikari, the health unit chief of Ribdikot. “The elected representatives at local levels are affirmative about the proposal providing allowances to health workers during the second wave as well but no official decision has been taken yet.” (Post 2021)

“The local unit stopped issuing the allowance after a month, citing budget shortage as the federal and provincial governments did not release a budget for the same,” said Jiban Rana, the chief at the health unit (Post 2021). According to him, all 10 local units in Palpa—two municipalities and eight rural municipalities—have failed to provide the risk allowances of the last fiscal year.

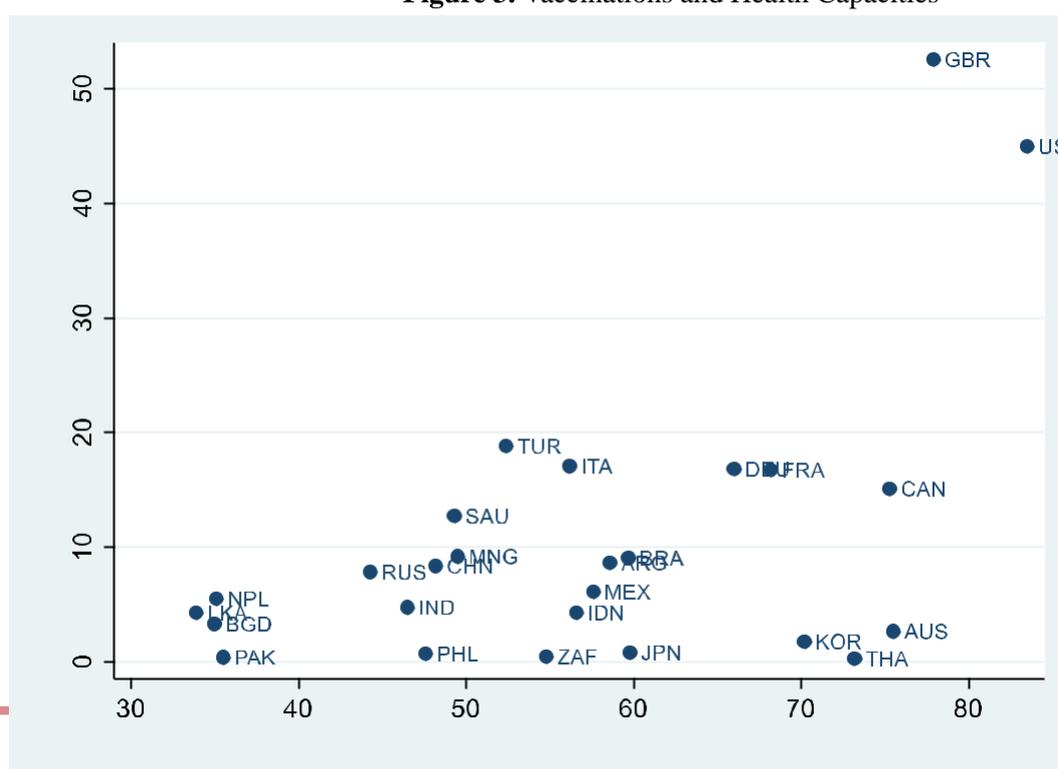
Krishna Prasad Basyal, the chairman of the local unit, stated that the health workers who received regular salaries from the state coffers should not expect allowances during these difficult times. “They received their salaries. That was all we could manage last year,” said Basyal. “If we get the budget for risk allowance this year, we will provide allowances to the health workers.” (Post 2021)

Meanwhile, the local representatives claim that they could not provide the risk allowances to health workers because the government—both federal and provincial—had not issued the funds for it.

Amidst the pandemic, the national daily newspapers and channels covered other important issues such as the raising feud among the political party leaders of the ruling government. There is a huge lack of accountability and democratic governance in the present government.

Nepal government's poor communication system has left many Nepalis confused about its vaccination campaign. The citizens do not know the status of the country's stock of the vaccines and the vaccination plan of the government (whether or not they will procure more doses). Back in January, Nepal became one of the first countries to launch its vaccination drive against the virus, even as some western countries were struggling. The country noticed a dramatic decline in the number of new cases. The KP Sharma Oli government acted triumphant as if it had already won the fight against the pandemic. Complacency, coupled with negligence, missteps, and poor governance to a sharp rise in the COVID-19 cases. The country has been overwhelmed by the pandemic. Nepal's health system is buckling under pressure. Hospitals are turning away patients because they lack beds and oxygen. Nepal's plan to procure millions of doses of vaccines is currently in a state of limbo.

Figure 3. Vaccinations and Health Capacities



Source:

<https://www.ghsindex.org/> and <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus-testing>

The analysis by Jung Kim (Jung Kim) illustrates the relationship between vaccinations and health capacities in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic. As of March 31, 2021, Nepal is one of the on-the-line performers in the sample.

Nepal launched its vaccination drive on January 27, 2021, with the AstraZeneca vaccine manufactured by India under the brand name Covishield. The campaign was launched with the 1 million doses India had provided under grant assistance. At that time, the virus had claimed 2,017 lives and infected 270,092 across the country. Around 430,000 frontline workers—health workers, supporting staffers at health facilities, female community health volunteers, security personnel, sanitation workers—, elderly people living in care homes, and prisoners were listed as priority groups for vaccination. After the first round of the vaccinations was completed, the government said journalists and diplomatic staff could be vaccinated

When the government announced that the first phase was completed on March 5, as many as 438,000 had received their first dose. The government said all citizens above 65 years of age would be inoculated. The public response was quite encouraging. In the second phase, around 1.3 million people were inoculated across the country.

Officials stated that those working in postal and telephone services, public transportation services, water supply and distribution, tourism sector—hotels and restaurants—production, sales and distribution of medicines, electricity supply, storage and transportation of consumer goods as well as health workers who missed out in the first phase of the vaccination would be vaccinated with the Chinese vaccines. Vaccines were administered from Dhulikhel Hospital, Barhabise Hospital of Sindhupalchok, and district hospitals in Nuwakot, Rasuwa as well as several hospitals of Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Bhaktapur of the Kathmandu Valley.

After essential workers aged between 18 and 59 years were vaccinated, authorities announced that those aged 40 to 59 years who are willing to be inoculated can receive vaccination from various designated hospitals. Mismanagement, however, led to crowding. According to the Health Ministry, around 289,000 people were vaccinated with Chinese Sinopharm vaccines before the inoculation campaign was halted.

The government does not know and is uncertain about how many, out of 1.3 million people who took the first Covishield dose, did not receive the second dose. These people need to take their booster dose between May 16 to May 29. The government has already stated that under the present circumstances, bringing in more vaccines from India is almost impossible. After placing an order for 2 million doses, the government planned to procure an additional 5 million doses from the Serum Institute. However, after cases started to rise, India put a hold on the export of Covishield. Serum has not supplied the remaining 1 million doses for which Nepal has already paid. Officials were expecting to receive some doses under the WHO-backed COVAX facility by the end of May, but they told the Post that they have been informed that the supply would be delayed. “The supply could be pushed further to June,” an official said. (TKP 2021)

The Health Ministry has prepared an online vaccine registration form, in which the public has to update their details. Once people fill up this form, they will be permanently registered.⁹

Increased Threat of the Pandemic and No Concrete Measures

Currently, when one steps out of a house, he/she can easily find a taxi, a bus, or a tempo. The roads have returned to the normal before the pandemic. Offices and shops are opened after the lockdown measures were removed. A substantial number of people walk around without face masks.

Ministry of Physical Infrastructure and Transportation issued a notice on decisions made by the

⁹ “Nepal’s Vaccination Status,” The Kathmandu Post (The Kathmandu Post), accessed June 20, 2021, <https://kathmandupost.com/health/2021/05/12/nepal-s-vaccination-status>.

ministerial level regarding the Public Vehicle Operation and Monitoring Directives. The directives stated that all owners of public vehicles and passengers should comply with certain safety standards throughout the pandemic period. The standards attached along with the notice have clearly defined how social distancing should be maintained inside public vehicles. The standards have also instructed the vehicle owners to clean the vehicles with disinfectant daily. The use of masks and sanitizers have been made mandatory¹⁰. However, the implementation of these measures has been extremely poor. After the notice was first issued, it seemed as if everyone was following the protocols. However, as time passed, these measures were not properly followed by neither the vehicle owners nor the passengers.

Public transportation such as buses, taxis, and tempos was allowed to operate normally if they followed the safety protocols such as maintaining physical distances and using sanitizer and disinfectants. However, vehicle owners did not comply with the measures. The fares were increased by 50 % to decrease risks but daily commuters continued to use public transportation. The government has also not been properly monitoring to ensure that the measures are being followed.¹¹

Amid the pandemic, the ruling government dissolved the parliament in the lower house. There have been more and more political uncertainties looming over Nepal as the country is focused on the internal feud among politicians. The government announced that the mid-term election will be held in November 2021 to elect 275 members of Parliament at the federal level which, according to the Election Commission of Nepal, will cost about NPR 10 billion, somehow equal to that of the estimations made for the prior election that was due in February 2021. The cost will rise in threefold if the election of all three-tier is announced.¹²

Part of the Nepal Communist Party has started to protest against the government. High-profile political leaders are leading protests in which social-distancing measures are not kept. There are regular hearings at the Supreme Court of Nepal on the writ petitions filed against the dissolution of the House of Representatives.

Way Forward

Due to the poor governance and shortsightedness of the government, the threat of the crisis continues to increase. The infection rate notices a decrease in comparison to the people contracting the virus but the death rate has not decreased. Governments are planning to loosen the lockdown but with minimal preparation and its impact is yet to be measured in the near future. The government should maintain the same measures and make additional policies to minimize the potential danger.

Mass gatherings should be prohibited as much as possible as unnecessary protests and mass gatherings increase the risk of the spread of the virus. Another solution would be to require that the safety protocols be followed by the protestors during the rallies.

Frontline medical personnel are the key fighters against Covid-19 and they have contributed to the improvement of public health day and night. To motivate such fighters and keep them going they should be provided with risk allowances. Similarly, people from low-income groups, and people from marginalized communities have lost lives of their family members and faced huge financial challenges due to loss of jobs and income. In order to heal them to some extent, they should be compensated for their pandemic-related losses.

The federal government should come with a broader central policy guideline on pandemic control.

¹⁰ Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration, Nepal “Public Transportation Operation Directory”, October 6, 2020, <https://mofaga.gov.np/news-notice/2132> (Accessed)

¹¹ Anup Ojha, “Valley Public Vehicles Are Not Complying with Health and Safety Protocols,” The Kathmandu Post, September 22, 2020, <https://kathmandupost.com/valley/2020/09/22/valley-public-vehicles-are-not-complying-with-health-and-safety-rules>. (Accessed December 4 2020).

¹² Ashok Dahal, “100 billion: The cost of Nepal’s next parliamentary election,” The Annapurna Express January 21, 2021, <https://theannapurnaexpress.com/news/rs-100-billion-the-cost-of-nepals-next-parliamentary-election-2984>

Provinces and local governments need to further formulate guidelines that are based on their unique context. The policies should also be implemented and monitored in order to create positive results. Therefore, monitoring systems should be made to ensure that COVID-19 policies are properly implemented and followed through.

The government should also create policies regarding medical equipment. Oxygen cylinders should be made available quickly and at any time by making sure there is enough in supply. This may help control the death rate as the unavailability of oxygen accounts for the majority of the deaths during the second wave.

Proper preparedness plans should be developed to address natural disasters and pandemic crises like COVID-19. The monsoon of 2021 is forecasted to create severe damage than that in 2020. As of July 29, 2020, 141 people have lost their lives, mostly due to landslides in hilly districts, with at least another 57 missing. According to NRCS's situation report as of July 30, 2020, 15,307 families (76,535 people) have been affected in various districts and 7,106 families (35,530 people) have been displaced. The need for shelter items, food items, and Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) services is crucial in the affected districts. Additionally, there is a high risk of waterborne disease outbreaks in case of inundation in the terai region due to excessive rainfall.¹³

In order to regain trust from the public, the government should make expenses and methods of procurement transparent. Also, as neighboring giants like China and India are making progress on controlling the pandemic, Nepal should maintain balanced relationships to gain medical support. This will allow for the economic growth and political stability of the country.

¹³ "Nepal: Monsoon Floods and Landslides - Information Bulletin n° 1", reliefweb, July 31, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/nepal/nepal-monsoon-floods-and-landslides-information-bulletin-n-1-1>

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- **Pradip Pariyar** is Executive Chairperson of Samata Foundation. Mr. Pradip Pariyar is an alumnus of American University and Tribhuvan University. He specializes in youth empowerment, peace building and capacity building of media professionals. 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 national youth development policy. He has trained thousands of youths globally on leadership, peace building, and conflictsensitive journalism. He founded the Nepal Youth Forum to focus on policy advocacy, awareness, and youth empowerment. In 2011, Mr. Pariyar was selected as a youth fellow by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. He received “Asia’s 21 Young Leaders Award” in 2018 by Asia Society. Mr. Pariyar also 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. Traveling throughout the length and breadth of Nepal, Mr. Pariyar witnessed diverse cultures and had encounters with his social offended country people have invigorated his dream fuelled by the unholy dogma of casteism. He dreams of just Nepal; a cohesive society where an individual’s potential, competence, edification and hard slo define a person rather than his/her status.

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For inquiries:

Junghye Suh, Research Associate

Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 207) Jhsuh@eai.or.kr

The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D, Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu,
Seoul 04548, South Korea
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697
Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr