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Covid-19 and Pandemic Politics Conceptualizing the South Asian Experience

ASIF M. SHAHAN

Covid-19 emerged as a global crisis in 2020 and played a pivotal role in shaping both national and global political scenario. However, whereas the economic and/or social impacts of the pandemic have received widespread coverage and several efforts have been made to systematically analyze the phenomena, attempts to explore and understand politics-pandemic relationship, and interaction between them, appear to have been quite limited. A tacit understanding, however, exists within the political science community that the pandemic-politics interaction works at two different levels: a country's internal political capacity determines as to how that country would design and implement its efforts to deal with the pandemic, on the one hand, and the pandemic has also created opportunities for the country's political actors to develop strategies either to contract or expand political space, on the other. Eventually, questions related with pandemic politics revolve around two key issues: whether and how the internal

institutional capacity of a government (or degree of government effectiveness) can affect its pandemic responses, and whether and how the executive can try to undermine the legislature, the judiciary and other political institutions to exert control over the policy and political agenda. These questions will guide pandemic politics for years to come and the articles included in this newsletter provide important insights required to answer these questions in the context of South Asia.

It is important to note that two inter-related concepts are closely connected with pandemic politics—state capacity and (political) institutional capacity. From the very beginning of the Covid-19 crisis, political scientists have focused on these two key issues, without considering how these two can interact with each other or what the consequence of that interaction can be. For instance, while explaining the variation in responses to this pandemic, Fukuyama (2020) specifically concentrated on state capacity and argued that throughout the world, strong

executives, be it within a liberal democracy framework or an authoritarian system, are performing better: “The major dividing line in effective crisis response will not place autocracies on one side and democracies on the other. Rather, there will be some high-performing autocracies, and some with disastrous outcomes. There will be a similar, though likely smaller, variance in outcomes among democracies. The crucial determinant in performance will not be the type of regime, but the state’s capacity”.¹ However, the problem of Fukuyama’s assertion lies in the faith on a strong executive, which has the possibility to backfire. Acemoglu & Robinson (2019) indicated that danger in “The Narrow Corridor” while introducing the concept of “Shackled Leviathan”.² The argument is simple: political institutions constrain the executives from undermining democratic practices and force them to perform to serve people while being accountable for its actions. Pandemics like Covid-19, however, allow the ‘shackled leviathan’ to break free and centralize power, which may often be used to oppress the opposition or undermine media freedom. Understanding pandemic politics is, thus, about finding answer to an important political puzzle—how can we ensure that a strong executive (strength that is required for designing pandemic response) would still function within a certain boundary established by and maintained through the functioning of the political institutions? The key goal here is to find a balance—the equilibrium point, where state capacity (government effectiveness) intersects with (political) institutional capacity.

To understand where the South Asian countries stand in terms of reaching to this point of equilibrium, a useful approach is to consider a generalized model of pandemic decision making and to identify equilibrium point within that framework. From this perspective, Meyers’ Leaders’ Decision-making Framework (LDF) can be considered as a good starting point.³ The LDF suggests that while dealing with the pandemic, all governments have gone through an initial phase where they either acknowledged the crisis or decided to ignore it. Ignoring or undermining the crisis usually means ridiculing the experts and relying on unscientific information. However, mere acknowledging the crisis does not ensure a proper response and this is where ensuring a proper role (to be

played) by the executive becomes important. As per the framework, after understanding the crisis, an executive may introduce ‘liberal policies’ where vibrant and performing political institutions would ensure that the ‘shackled leviathan’ is responding to the crisis appropriately, or it may introduce illiberal policies where the strong executive would utilize the crisis to break free from institutional constraint, would introduce harsh punishments discriminately, and use the pandemic as an excuse to crack down on the opposition parties and gag the media. Whereas embracing ‘liberal policies’ would mean that the country is moving towards the

equilibrium, the opposite would indicate its decision to move towards a different direction.

Even though it is not possible to understand as to where the South Asian

countries currently stand, we can gain some important insights from the articles included in the newsletter. The key takeaway related to pandemic politics remains:

First, in almost all cases, the governments have moved quickly and decisively to deal with the pandemic. At the same time, the governments have usually followed the similar approach where the concentration has been on the enforcement of lockdown while ensuring that people affected by the lock-down are getting necessary financial and food supports. Tashi Dema’s piece on Bhutan and Ruwanthi Jayasekara’s write-up on Sri Lanka show how a strong executive’s decisive action can make all the difference. In case of Bhutan, the King had led the effort, “travelled to the high-risk areas of the country to motivate and encourage people to remain resilient”, and a physician Prime Minister provided the necessary support. In Sri Lanka, the government managed the pandemic well by adopting a 3T (Testing, Treating, and Tracing) approach.

Secondly, even though the governments have opted for early and decisive actions, Covid-19 has indeed revealed the fault lines in the socio-economic structures of different countries. Rashed Al Mahmud’s work on Bangladesh shows how the pandemic has exposed the ‘faults’ in the public health sector and has created pressure on the country’s economy that need to be addressed through active policy interventions. Bhutan’s economy has also suffered significantly and so did

It is important to note that two inter-related concepts are closely connected with pandemic politics—state capacity and (political) institutional capacity.

¹ Fukuyama, F. (2020). The thing that determines a country’s resistance to the coronavirus. The Atlantic, 30. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/thing-determines-how-well-countries-respond-coronavirus/609025/>

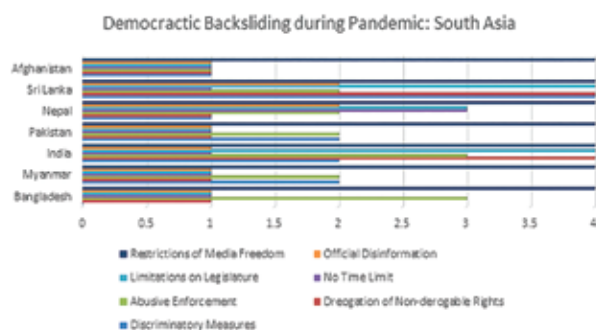
² Acemoglu, D., & Robinson, J. A. (2019). The narrow corridor: States, societies, and the fate of liberty. Penguin Books.

³ Meyer, B. (2020) ‘Pandemic Populism: An Analysis of Populist Leaders’ Responses to Covid-19’, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. Available at: <https://institute.global/policy/pandemic-populism-analysis-populist-leaders-responses-covid-19>

Afghanistan's and Nepal's. Mariyam Shakeela's write-up on Maldives shows how the pandemic has made it clear to the government of the country that it needs to diversify its economy. Ahmad Bilal Khalil's article on Afghanistan and Rohit Karki's paper on Nepal highlight the same lesson.

Thirdly, several articles included in the newsletter have highlighted how limited capacity of the political institutions has often created problems for these countries to come up with 'liberal policies'. Then, again, in several countries, factors like political instability, polarization and weakness of the legislature or the judiciary have negatively affected the countries' responses and, in some cases, encouraged the executive to 'unshackle'. The point of views expressed in the articles fit well with the recent "Pandemic Backsliding: Democracy during Covid-19 (March- December, 2020)" report published by 'Varieties of Democracy'. The report looked into seven specific criteria (restrictions on media freedom, official disinformation, abusive enforcement, no time limit, limitations of legislature, derogation of non-derogable rights and discriminatory measures) and tried to see whether the executive tried to violate citizens' rights in these seven areas. As the figure below shows, almost all the governments had made some efforts, by varying degrees though, to curb rights. As it turns out, Sri Lanka, India and Nepal were the worst performers whereas Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh have performed relatively better, even though all the governments have tried to take control. The worst sufferer of the executive's effort is the media as all the governments concerned have tried to impose restrictions on the media.⁴

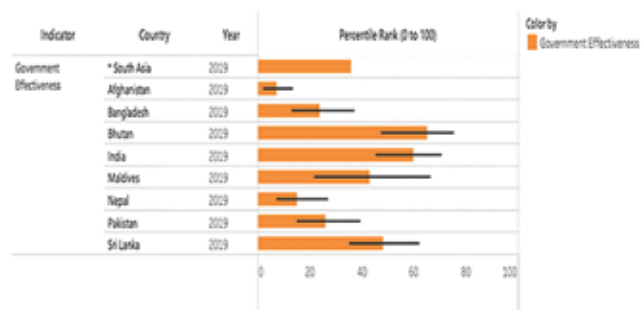
Fourthly, effectiveness of the government machinery (reflecting state capacity) has also emerged as an important factor in determining pandemic response. In the context of Pakistan, the significance of this particular



⁴The figure has been generated by the author based on data produced by V-Dem. Data and presentation can be found at: <https://www.v-dem.net/en/analysis/PanDem/>

⁵The figure has been generated by author based on WBI's World Wide Governance Indicators (WGI). Data is available at: <https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/Home/Reports>

factor has been well captured by Imtiaz Gul, when he argues, "[T]he British colonial model of governance remains a big obstacle towards Pakistan's progress, for the model is slow and insufficiently equipped to keep in steps of the current era". Mariyam Shakeela's work on Maldives draws similar conclusion- "[I]t must be noted that inability to address the issue effectively cannot be attributed to any lack of legal instrumentation, rather to the lack of proper enforcement of the instruments as well as monitoring and evaluation of the situation". It is interesting to note that as per the viewpoint of essays included in this newsletter, countries that have a weak government effectiveness score (as per the World Bank's Governance Indicators) have not necessarily performed well. On the other hand, countries having good government effectiveness score (i.e., higher than the South Asia average, as shown in the figure below⁵) have tried to tackle pandemic effectively and eventually managed to create a global impact. Chayanika Saxena's analysis of India's performance is a good example of the proposition as it shows how India engaged into a successful Covid-19 diplomacy to declare and cement its presence at the global scale.



What conclusions can we draw based on the essays published in the newsletter and the discussion above? Whereas we cannot claim to have solved the pandemic politics puzzle, we can, nevertheless, confirm two specific things—the Covid-19 pandemic has indeed allowed the executives to undermine democratic political institutions and to opt for 'illiberal' policy responses, on the one hand, and, on the other, countries with high-performing government machineries have managed to come up with better pandemic responses.

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Active restraint warranted for averting a K-shaped pathway

RASHED AL MAHMUD TITUMIR

The COVID-19 has been stained with harrowing experiences of health anxieties, job insecurity, eroded income and an overall curtailed control over life. Apart from the severe health risks, it has revealed the fault lines in the socio-economic structures of Bangladesh that have been aggravated, mangled by the ravages of the global pandemic.

The effects of polarisation and differentiation are visible in the fragmentation of the intermediate classes —the higher income percentiles seize newer avenues of income owed to a growing physically-disjointed productive sector while the vulnerable lower income percentiles face significant income erosion and are flung into poverty. The median income tier in the intermediate classes also experienced partial income erosion that has substantially reduced their standard of living.

The principal quarry of the COVID-19 crisis was the healthcare sector. Faults in the public health sector have been exposed by the COVID-19 outbreak as hospitals are overburdened with patients. While Bangladesh's doctor-to-patient ratio is 5.26 per 10,000 people, the second-lowest in South Asia (WHO, 2019), the total budgetary allocation is 0.9 percent of the GDP vis-à-vis the WHO's recommendation of 5 percent. The gaping setback in the allocation over the years was, in turn, reflected in the inadequacy and inefficacy of public and private healthcare in combating the blows of the COVID-19. The pandemic shows that the health care requires a radical change, and universal healthcare service needs to be promoted to ensure accessibility and affordability, with reforms beginning with primary healthcare.

The COVID-19 has severely affected education of an estimated fifty million students from the primary to university level while it would increase the rich-poor disparity in the education system. Since 44 percent of Bangladeshi households have no television set and an even greater number of people have no access to the internet, a huge number of children from poor families have lost access to education.

However, the precarity of the Bangladeshi youths began long before the COVID-19 outbreak, as prospects for

employment; quality education and skill formation were persistently scant. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Bank, 27.39 percent of young people were not employed in any form of employment, education or training.

A lifecycle-based universal social security system, comprising income support, national health care services, child benefits, housing benefits, disability living allowance, invalid care allowance, state pension and job seekers' allowance, has to be put in place to reduce the impact of shocks on the growing number of vulnerable people. Social security constitutes the mechanism for the protection of human rights by way of ensuring accessibility, availability and affordability of public health and education.



Therefore, active restraint policies, such as the provision of public goods and adoption of structural reforms, can lead to a relatively equitable recovery, thwarting possibility of a K-shaped one of wealth concentrating upwards in the hands of a few while a significant majority sliding down. Under the circumstances, a proactive and accountable state is the key to making such a sustainable and equitable recovery.

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India's Covid -19 Diplomacy in the year of Pandemic

CHAYANIKA SAXENA

Is a mutation of the existing corona virus likely to become a global headache in 2021? Perhaps, this is one of the most unsettling statements with which one could have opened an article on the times ahead of us. But the last year was one eventful year in every sense of the term. 2020 was a year of ironies. It was the year in which the world became one, courtesy of the pandemic's global reach, even as countries turned inwards to protect their citizens. But as international borders were getting sealed, the flow of ideas to combat the contagious virus hopped from one nation to another, and so did economic and moral assistance. In what may be described as "CoVIDiplomacy", this neologism captures well the international negotiations that went on as countries came together to extend support and solidarity with peoples of other nations in the trying year. India too came forward to discharge its responsibility as a burgeoning economic and R&D Centre too many countries in South Asia and beyond.

India's Covid diplomacy took many forms in 2020. Nationally, while it imposed one of the most stringent lockdowns in the entire world, it carried out a relatively successful international mission of bringing stranded Indians back home. Called "Vande Bharat", India ensured evacuation of thousands of its citizens stuck in different parts of the world, thereby easing the load on their host countries too. At the same time, it also aided the repatriation of foreign nationals to their respective home states by creating specific air corridors or air bubbles. Besides facilitating timely, and much-needed, movement of people across sealed international borders, India also extended other kinds of support, especially to its neighbors. From providing tons of grain to Afghanistan to offering critical medical supplies to Nepal and Myanmar, India's CoVIDiplomacy proved efficient in building bridges in the fraught South Asian region. Similarly, its stated assurance to provide

'indigenously made vaccine' to Bangladesh on priority basis can be viewed as India's conscious diplomatic outreach to thaw the coldness that had crept into its bilateral ties for other reasons.

India's CoVIDiplomatic efforts were not restricted to its home region alone. It went far and beyond South Asia to provide the USA with large dosages of Remdesivir to help the latter deal with the virus outbreak. Its naval fleet too, in this case, INS Air vat, was put to use to provide African countries of Sudan, South Sudan, Djibouti and Eritrea with 270 million tons of food aid. From helping countries cope with the pandemic all this

India's CoVIDiplomatic efforts were not restricted to its home region alone. It went far and beyond South Asia to provide the USA with large dosages of Remdesivir to help the latter deal with the virus outbreak.



while, today, India has joined hands with South Africa to seek equitable distribution and affordability of internationally-produced vaccines by petitioning against their patenting. This measure is likely to go a long way in ensuring that developing and least developed countries are not deprived of their rightful share of the so-called miraculous medicine.

The lessons of the "new normal" must not be forgotten. Simultaneously, the friendly CoVIDiplomatic outreach that was being carried out in the pandemic's wake must continue to take place in even friendlier forms. India's CoVIDiplomacy has shown that it is the neighbors' you reach out and count on in trying times. Now, the emphasis must be on keeping this momentum going.

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Pakistan Striving to Defeat Geopolitics and Status Quo

The British colonial model of governance remains a big obstacle towards Pakistan's progress, for the model is slow and insufficiently equipped to keep in step with demands of the current era.

IMTIAZ GUL

Struck like many other nations by COVID-19 and beset by the US-led geopolitics, Pakistan today is trying hard to extricate itself from the consequences of the 15-year-long fake news/disinformation campaign by the Indian Srivastava group through a vast network of some 750 news outlets and web domains. This campaign across 119 countries greatly and negatively influenced Pakistan's image abroad. This has precipitated internal discontent.

The revelations of this large fake news network operating against Pakistan came indeed as a vindication of Islamabad's long standing claim that India supports elements of destabilization and subversion inside Pakistan.

Secondly, together with China, Pakistan is trying to shift its focus from geo-politics to geo-economics through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. It has tried its best to contribute to the intra-Afghan negotiations to nudge Afghan Taliban into talks with the Kabul government, conscious of the fact that without peace in Afghanistan, peace in Pakistan will be difficult and that will also impede economic revival and turn around.

However, the British colonial model of governance remains a big obstacle towards Pakistan's progress, for the model is slow and insufficiently equipped to keep in

step with demands of the current era. The decision-making process is still slow and complex, which, in turn, obstructs quicker implementation of projects.

Thirdly, unfortunately, like a few other states, Pakistan has also suffered from the lack of global Internet regulations, on the one hand, discrimination, on the other, which have been exploited by different states to pursue their strategic agendas.

For instance, when Pakistan or other Muslim countries lodge complaints on sensitive religious issues, the Western governments as well as the authorities of the social media platforms, such as Twitter and Face book, often snub them. But most people in the US and Europe kept silent, indeed endorsed when Twitter and others took President Trump out. They all defended the move in the name of national security. But our experience shows that "freedom of expression" is much dearer to these countries and companies when it comes to issues of Pakistan's national interests.

Lastly, Pakistan is trying to harness its greatest asset, its young labor force that is, it's growing IT sector and prized geo-economic location. Pakistan has been declared top tourist destination by several renowned outlets. Its strategic location gives Pakistan the leverage to play a role of bridge builder and peacemaking among competitors. Pakistan is also moving on a positive trajectory on Human rights issues and is trying to bridge the gaps where necessary. Weakness lies in improving governance and ensuring policy continuity in the right direction.

Reforms in that context is difficult, with a lot of push-back by the forces of status quo, such as traditional political forces, bureaucracy and business cartels, which refuse to make way for democratic reforms. The elite capture has made the process difficult for Prime Minister Imran Khan, who is focused on the welfare of the common people – something that was never the focus of previous governments.

Imtiaz Gul
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Sri Lanka: Where about?

RUWANTHI JAYASEKARA

As Sri Lanka was recovering from the socio-economic destruction caused by the Easter Sunday attacks, the country was hit hard by the Corona pandemic. Different sectors of its economy, ranging from tourism to retail and financial ones, stood standstill. A developing state with an import-oriented economy, Sri Lanka is over dependent on many other states, while the state's exports to the key markets, such as the US, the UK, Italy and Germany. Under the circumstance, the financial impact of the lockdowns, national and global, imposed due to the pandemic was devastating.

As Laurie Garrett says, the pandemic not only has a long-lasting economic impact, but it is to bring in a more fundamental change. Sri Lanka, apart from being exposed to debt trap, is in a financial peril, which finds expression in its being ranked 61 out of 66 countries, worse than other South Asian states.

The pandemic has truly exposed the failures of the existing system, and showed the importance of self-sufficiency particularly in the agricultural sector. In the midst of the pandemic, the government has promoted home-based gardening and distributed seeds for kitchen gardening and introduced national paddy buying programme through collecting harvests from small farmers.

However, with the current government in power, Sri Lanka has been able to manage the Covid-19 pandemic better than its South Asian neighbors through a 3T approach, namely Testing, Treating and Tracing. Sri Lanka was supported by many states, including India, China and Europe with test kits, PCR tests and Viral Transport Medium etc. The most prominent among them was mask diplomacy by China – another successful soft power display by China. Sri Lanka's relations with China remain economic while Colombo would not let anyone disrespect its sovereignty. Not surprisingly, political tension was created when a leader

of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, a major political party of the country, said that his party should be like Chinese Communist Party or India's BJP.

In Mike Pompeo's message to Sri Lanka, he requested us to choose a "more democratic path than a tyranny", referring to our relations with China. Reactions from the embassy of China became the most aggressive ever, resulting in its 'wolf warrior diplomacy'. It should be noted that the two visits by the Chinese delegation and one by US Secretary Pompeo in 2020 to Sri Lanka did not result in forging any alliance or alignment with either of the foreign states. Sri Lanka remains to be a

non-aligned and respects sovereignty, international law and rules-based order. Yet, a triple-sphere of influence by China, US and India prevails in Sri Lanka. Brewing tensions among the big powers over control and influence create grave impact on small states like Lanka.

It is unfortunate that multilateralism, such as

SAARC and BIMSTEC, has weakened when it is needed the most, when the world is facing trends of a bi-polar shift. Sri Lanka is unlikely to prefer hedging with one against another. India is Sri Lanka's 'big brother' and China is the financial partner. Yet, tensions in the region rise with revisiting Indo-Pacific against the BRI. Sri Lanka supports both strategies, but as advocates of Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace, would never stand for militarization of the oceans. Sri Lanka, therefore, faces geopolitical challenges by the triple spheres of influence. Today, multilateral forums should address bi-lateral matters such as this, if multilateralism is to prevail successfully. Geopolitical game should no more be viewed as a strategic competition, but more cooperation with prominence given to small players as well.



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Nepal's Political Crisis and Geopolitics

ROHIT KARKI

Nepal plunge into a political crisis with the dissolution of Parliament by Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Oli on December 20 and announcement of mid-term election for April 2021. This move was widely criticized by constitutional experts, politicians and other observers as 'unconstitutional', with large anti-government demonstrations erupted blaming the government move as disastrous for political stability. Even though the government decision has been challenged in the Supreme Court, it is quite likely that the court would legitimize the government decision, due to the extreme politicization of various institutions in Nepal, including judiciary. Political uncertainty looms large now, with deep suspicion of the elections being conducted in the stipulated timeframe. If the elections are not held on time, it might affect Nepal's constitutionalism and its nascent federal republican set up. Notably, not a single elected government has so far succeeded to complete its constitutionally mandated five-year term in past 30 years due to intra-party and inter-party fighting as primary reasons for Nepal's political instability. The current political crisis has also arisen out of conflicts existing within the Nepal Communist Party (NCP), which was formed in 2018 with the merger of two largest communist organizations of Nepal. The Nepalese people voted the NCP to power in 2018 general elections for five-years to bring in much needed political stability, introduce good governance and ensure economic prosperity in the country. However, China played a pivotal role in the unification of the two parties with a larger goal of implementing its projects related to the Belt and Road Infrastructure (BRI). The recent high-level visit from China shows the importance that it attaches to preserve a strong communist party in Nepal by way of keeping the NCP united. Nevertheless, this was construed by many as a divergence from China's traditional non-interference policy in Nepal. For India, on the other hand, the dissolution of the parliament provided a re-entry point much earlier than expected to protect its core strategic interests. India has been clearly frustrated with the growing proximity between the NCP and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), including their convergence on the core foreign and security policy issues at the national and regional levels. However, with the split in the NCP, India has quickly positioned itself, with the motive of establishing

a right-wing coalition with the aim of reinstatement of the Hindu state in Nepal to preserve its core interests. Besides, the rising neo-monarchy support in Nepal has been further emboldened with consolidation of Hindutva agenda in India under the ruling Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). The visit of the chief of India's intelligence external agency, Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), followed by the



Chief of Indian Army in Nepal last month, provides growing convergence of interests between the two governments. The visit also helped to re-build trust and confidence between two governments, which hit an all-time low when border dispute erupted between two countries in the beginning of 2020. Overall, the competing convergence and divergences of geopolitical interests of Nepal's regional neighbors' and its ability to manage these relationships will determine the future roadmap for Nepal's domestic politics. Meanwhile, Nepal should aim at resolving the current political impasse through a domestic political consensus, rather than providing any space for regional actors, for a continued crisis might threaten the sustainability of its federal democratic constitutional framework.

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Bhutan relies on its Kings during the pandemic

TASHI DEMA

When the citizens of the tiny Himalayan nation of Bhutan, nestled between the two Asian giants, India and China, first heard of the novel coronavirus outbreak in China in December 2019, no one expected it to spread across the globe and affect people's life the way it is doing now.

The Bhutanese people, majority of whom are Buddhist, firmly believed that with the protection of their local deities, the virus would never reach Bhutan. But today, 1,119 people are infected with the virus, 999 people declared recovered and a man has already died of the virus.

The country recorded the first Covid-19 case on March 6 last year when a 76-year-old American tourist, who entered Bhutan through India, fell ill and tested positive.

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While many Bhutanese wondered and worried how the small country could deal with the pandemic, everyone pinned their hope on the enigmatic leadership of their

kings as they did before in the times of emergency.

His Majesty The King, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, travelled all over the country and coordinated the pandemic responses. Even His Majesty the Fourth King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, travelled to the high-risk areas of the country to motivate and encourage people to remain resilient.

During the two lockdowns the country experienced, the first one in August last year and the second one, which was lifted a few days ago, the King ensured that everyone impacted by the pandemic and the lockdowns was looked after by means of royal welfare.

The global pandemic, however, impacted the lives of every Bhutanese. It affected the country's economy and disrupted it, as the main backbone of the economy, the tourism and hospitality sector, is severely affected. Many Bhutanese lost jobs and lockdowns impacted daily wage earners and businesses.

The country, which is heavily dependent on India for import of essentials, was forced to seal its borders with India in March last year. Patrols have been beefed up to guard the 699kms border with India in the south, west and east, which is covered by dense mountain jungles, and 470 kilometres with China in the north, straddling the Himalayan ranges.



The government, with a Prime Minister who is a physician by profession, is doing all it could to combat the pandemic. It is, however, facing heavy public criticism, especially for the protocols it framed to address the Covid-19 affected citizens.

Like the rest of the world, Bhutan is anxiously waiting for an effective and affordable vaccine against this dreadful disease. India had already gifted Bhutan 150,000 covishield vaccines in January and the government is devising out a new strategy to vaccinate the people eligible to receive it.

Meanwhile, the Bhutanese people are hoping and praying for efficient treatment of, and quick recovery from, the disease.

Besides, they are waiting for things to return to normal while many feel blessed to have Their Majesties the Kings by their side and India as a trusted friend in this time of health crisis.

PS: It's the author's personal views and does not represent the views of Kuensel.

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Political and Development Issues of Maldives

MARIYAM SHAKEELA

The Maldives is a picture perfect archipelago, of outstanding beauty, and is celebrated as one of the most popular travel destinations in the world. It is also the lowest lying country in the world, and the smallest in South Asia, with 515, 696 people, half of them youth, dispersed across 185 islands. Over 30 percent of the population live in the capital city Male' making it one of the most densely populated cities of the world.

With only 80 percent of its 1,200 islands just over a meter above sea level, and 1 percent as land, our lifestyle and economy has a dynamic relation with marine and coastal environment. Over 44 percent of the settlement footprints are within 100 meters of the coastline translating to 42 percent of the population and 47 percent of all housing structures.

The advent of industrialization and the need for development are disrupting the natural equilibrium, on which our islands sustain, resulting in severe erosion of beach and shoreline, making us confront with complex issues. The geographical limitations faced by Maldives burden unit cost of service delivery and limit opportunities for education, socio-economic development, job creation and employment.

Despite the challenges, Maldives ranks 101 out of 189 countries in the Human Development Index (HDI), making it the second highest HDI rank in South Asia. The Gross National Income (GNI) per capita has increased by 132 percent. It has enjoyed impressive growth in its economy, infrastructure, countrywide connectivity, health with a life expectancy of over 78 years, education and a literacy rate approaching 100 percent, for both men and women. Nevertheless, Maldives has substantial pockets of poverty especially in the island communities.

With development many social evils emerged, among them, bitter political turmoil creating unhealthy social divides, wide use of drugs, corruption at all levels, unemployment issues, ever increasing migrant population, which is said to be the highest in South Asia with over 63,000 undocumented people. Youth unemployment is at 15.3 percent while the rate of women's participation in the workforce remains very low. Maldives is also struggling with Islamic

radicalization, pushing society towards a more conservative interpretation of Islam. Religious intolerance, incidents of violent extremism and Maldivians joining overseas jihadist groups have emerged as alarming issues in an otherwise liberal Muslim country like Maldives. These issues are negatively impacting society, especially women who are being coerced into submissive and backward state of conditions. Although President Solih has given commitment to find effective solutions to the problem of radicalization, the phenomenon remains a grave concern for many, for it might eventually push the country and its youth into chaos, which would destabilize the once peaceful island nation.

As our government struggles to find a solution to the problem, it must be noted that inability to address the issue effectively cannot be attributed to any lack of legal instrumentation, rather to the lack of proper enforcement of the instruments as well as monitoring and evaluation of the situation. Moreover, solution can only be found when Rule of Law exists with respect to democracy while Rule of Law cannot exist when it is not measured equally for the most powerful as well as the weakest.

The unprecedented shock of COVID-19 pandemic revealed our vulnerabilities – dependency on tourism as our economic mainstay being a major one. Our resilience to external shocks need to be strengthened, and yet, lack of arable land is a limitation of developing other sectors such as agriculture and fishing; and the growth of financial sector and business services is constrained by the lack of skills among local workers. Diversifying and investing in human capital, reforms to democratic institutions, judiciary, climate resilience measures and inclusive decentralization strategies would allow Maldives to withstand external shocks and build better.

Dr. Mariyam Shakeela
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Former Minister, Maldives



The Case for Afghanistan's Membership in Shanghai Cooperation Organization

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Since 2014, Afghanistan has been striving for full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), with no avail yet. It is still an observer state in the SCO, although the two highly populous South Asian countries, Pakistan and India, got full membership in July 2017. In this article, we will note multi-dimensional arguments that justifiably build the case for Afghanistan's full membership of the SCO.

Geographical location: Geographically, Afghanistan is a part of the SCO region. It is a direct neighbor of four SCO member states namely Pakistan, China, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and has very close historical and economic relations with the other four, such as, Russia (the former Afghan neighbor in the pre-1991), India (Afghan neighbor before 1947), Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Despite having no direct borders with the latter's, they are still considered as "close neighbors" in Afghan foreign policy.

Ethnic and cultural compatibilities: Out of 150 ethnic groups in the SCO region, roundabout 30 are living in Afghanistan, which has deep ethnic links with all of its neighbors because these ethnic groups are mostly

scattered in the region and are not living in one particular country. No other country is linked more ethnically, culturally, and historically in the SCO region except Afghanistan. Currently, Afghanistan is at the cross-juncture of all the SCO ethnicities. Therefore, connecting Afghanistan to the other SCO ethnicities will have a multiplier effect in the whole SCO region, resulting in a more culturally and ethnically connected region.

Diplomatic relations: Afghanistan has diplomatic relations with all the members of the SCO. In addition, it has also very close relations with the SCO observer states, except Mongolia and Belarus where Afghan diplomatic missions are not present but they are directed from Afghan embassies in China and Russia respectively. Still, with Mongolia and Belarus, Afghanistan has been engaged in education and economic sectors. In addition, and historically, it has recorded bilateral ties with the founding members of the SCO for centuries, including the newly graduated SCO members—Pakistan and India.

Economic ties: Afghanistan has very closed economic and trade ties with most of the SCO member states. This



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is backed up by statistics. In 2017-2018, more than 87 percent of the total Afghan imports were from the SCO countries; and more than 57 percent of Afghanistan's total exports were destined to the SCO member States; and in total, more than 60 percent of the Afghan total trade was with the SCO countries.

Afghanistan factor behind SCO formation: Afghanistan along with the post-Cold War Order is considered as one of the main driving factors behind the formation of the SCO, in the first place. In the post-Cold War era, the world became unipolar, and Afghanistan's situation was exploited by the regional powers, causing more chaos and instability and hence effecting Afghanistan to become a safe haven for regional extremist, terrorist and separatist movements, and become a fertile ground of opium production. This has been rightly pointed out by a former experienced Russian ambassador as that "One should not forget that the SCO emerged as a response to immediate threats of terrorism and drug trafficking, which came from Afghanistan in the late 1990s. The SCO idea was born from a collective demand for a regional coalition to combat them."

Similar policies: The Afghan government's fight against terrorism, extremism and opium cultivation remains in line with the SCO's fight against three evils, which is then considered the primary motives behind its formation in 2001. Hence, providing Afghanistan a full membership in the SCO will help the regional body achieve its objectives better and will further boost the regional integration and connectivity among the SCO region.

Perfect timing: Currently, the prospects for Afghan membership are better than anytime else as the US troops are planning to withdraw from Afghan, based on a peace deal signed between the Afghan Taliban and the USA in February 2020. However, prior to it, more than 65 percent of the US troops have left Afghanistan. This should remove concerns of some of the SCO members that are opposing Afghanistan's entry into the organization due to the presence of American troops in Afghanistan or Kabul's close alliance with Washington. Moreover, Afghanistan's membership in the SCO just before the success of the peace deal between Afghan government and Taliban will not only reduce the threats emanating from Afghanistan to the SCO region, but will also impact the reduction of the "power vacuum" after the US withdrawal. If the SCO wants that the region should not once again be plunged into the 1990s era, where a civil war broke out in Afghanistan, impacting a civil war in Tajikistan, stirring an Intifada in Kashmir, and rise of extremists and separatist feelings in Xinjiang, China, fueling radicalization of the whole region and spread of narcotics along with extremist ideas to Central Asia and Russia, it must act, and act actively in Afghanistan. Giving a full membership to Afghanistan could be the first step in this regard. In case of a failure, adverse regional power politics might emerge in the post-US withdrawal period, paving the way for proxy wars and consequent instability.

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Now Available





Upcomming Events

28-29

July, 2021

International e-Conference on Rethinking Development Cooperation

The Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) is going to organize a two-day long International e-Conference on 'Rethinking Development Cooperation' on July 28-29, 2021.

The existing roller-coaster system of development planning and execution needs serious overhauling to make it a good fit to manage development effectively. Likewise, DPs still in many occasions prefer to provide funds of their own area of interest ignoring alignment with government's development priorities. In addition, they like to plant the flag in many sectors for visibility ignoring division of labor that triggers fragmented aid and proliferation of projects. In this backdrop, the COVID-19 crisis raises a strong call to both Government and DPs to change their business for improved development results.

In this context, this International e-Conference intends to unveil the issues that may thwart development cooperation in renewed economic settings and resolute actions for reshaping collaboration in or after one of the most crucial economic crises of the history.

9-11

October, 2021



We are delighted to announce the inaugural edition of the Bay of Bengal Conversation which will be hosted by the Centre for Governance Studies, Bangladesh from October 9 to October 11, 2021. The three day conversation will discuss both the emerging regional and global political order and the associated institutional framework. It will focus on elucidating a human-first growth and development policy paradigm. This unique platform will convene around 200 delegates from over 70 countries to join the 400 brightest minds in Bangladesh to discuss, ideate, and debate the most pressing global issues. We expect to host ministers, members of parliaments, political leaders, and senior bureaucrats, military officials, diplomats, leading technologists, industrialists, journalists, civil society leaders and academics. The conversation will bring together diverse voices across sectors and geographies. The initiative intends to promote new ideas and to propose effective solutions that will help build a new humanitarian world order.

3-12

December, 2021



The Global Directions Conclave (GDC) is an annual intensive ten-day policy workshop organized by the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS). Each year, the conclave will bring together 50 outstanding young leaders, between 25 and 35 years of age, from diverse backgrounds, geographies, and sectors. The young leaders will be nominated by heads of governments, leaders of private sector and global experts.

The aim of the Conclave is to foster leadership qualities among the selected fellows, to engage them in discussions on issues that are trending worldwide, and to serve as a networking platform. Through cross-border dialogue, deliberations and debates with prominent figures from the world of politics, business and academia, fellows of the Conclave will get opportunities to assess as well as challenge conventional interpretations of the global challenges. The first edition of the Global Directions Conclave is scheduled to be held from 3-12 December 2021 in Dhaka and Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.



Engaging the Private Sector in Promoting an Inclusive, Accountable and Corruption-free System of Governance in Post-Covid-19 Era

Corruption remains widespread in Bangladesh, and it continues to create major hindrances to business, particularly the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), which is the backbone of the economy. The poor ranking of the country, 168th out of 190 countries, in the Doing Business Index of the World Bank is a testimony to this fact.

Centre for Governance Studies, being cognizant of the poor status of SMEs in Bangladesh, has initiated a project with the support of the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) which will assess the state of corruption at the grassroots levels and its impacts on the private sector, particularly the SMEs. As a part of this initiative the Centre will organize private sector-led regional consultations, Call to Action Against Corruption (CAAC) Conference, networking events and a CAAC Summit on the role of the private sector in promoting an inclusive, transparent and corruption-free governance system. An action plan will also be prepared to carry forward the fight against corruption.



Bangladesh

Searching the Ways Forward for Bangladesh in the Time of Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented economic and humanitarian crisis globally. It has also badly hit Bangladesh's economy and jeopardized the country's impressive achievements in various sectors including poverty reduction. Bangladesh should critically assess the impacts of the pandemic and prepare itself to counter any such threat in the near future. Centre for Governance Studies (CGS), with the support of UNDP, has initiated a project to develop a series of policy briefs that will assess the challenges faced by the country during the COVID-19 pandemic as well suggest policy recommendations to address the challenges. The Centre will also organize webinars and talks shows to disseminate the findings of the studies. A comprehensive policy report will be prepared incorporating all the findings and recommendations from the above-mentioned activities.



The Asia Foundation

The Fourth Estate: Under the Shadow of Restrictions and the Search for Ways Forward

A free and well-functioning media can play a conducive role in good governance and help combat national crises such as pandemic. However, in Bangladesh, where democratic space has shrunk remarkably in the past decade, media and journalists have been facing various challenges posed by the government while having little support from the media houses. Against this background, the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) intends to keep track of the fast-changing situation and identify the emerging challenges for journalists. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy, public health, governance and security will also be assessed in the process. The Centre will undertake a study to gather evidence and initiate the advocacy and awareness-building activities for ensuring freedom of the press. As a part of the campaign, investigative reports and opinion pieces will be prepared as well as webinars and talk shows will be organised. This Program is assisted by UK Aid and The Asia Foundation.



The Dark Cloud over Freedom in Bangladesh: The Digital Security Act 2018

The Digital Security Act was passed by the Bangladesh Parliament in 2018 after 5 controversial sections of the Information and Communication Technology Act/ ICT Act were eliminated. Since the DSA Act-2018 came into force, journalists, social and human activists, educators, members of civil society, diplomats, and various international organizations strongly objected to nine sections of the law, which they described as detrimental to freedom of speech; these Sections are 8, 21, 25, 28, 29, 31, 32, 43 and 53. This act has rampantly been used to muzzle journalists and citizens who have raised concerns about the mismanagement of the government.

Centre for Governance Studies (CGS), is committed to promoting democratic value, good governance, freedom of speech and expressions, and fundamental civil rights. The Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) with the support of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), has taken the initiative to document the cases filed under the DSA 2018 since January 1, 2020.

Event Highlights

50 Years of Bangladesh: Pathways and Trajectories



Searching Ways Forward For Bangladesh in the Time of Pandemic



Digital Security Act 2018



Mosquito Problem in the City: Way to Solve



CGS Forum



Young Researchers Development Forum (YRDF) is an initiative taken by the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) to develop a platform for young research enthusiasts across the country. The platform will help young promising students develop their research skills through active participation in various research projects. YRDF will also provide them training on various research techniques and tools. The initiative will contribute to the development of a skilled and dedicated researcher community in the country.



Executive Director's Note

On behalf of the Centre for Governance Studies, I am delighted to announce the publication of the inaugural issue of Clips, the monthly newsletter of the Centre. The theme of the first issue is "Covid-19 and Pandemic Politics: Conceptualizing the South Asian Experience". The issue highlights the political aspect of the global crisis. Since the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic social and economic adversities have been getting more focus while the impact of the pandemic on the governance and political system remains understudied.

The newsletter contains articles focusing on the analysis of government policies in response to the pandemic and their implementation in South Asian countries as well as geopolitical implications of the pandemic for these countries. The articles have also tried to point out the limitations of the government policies and the challenges faced during their implementation. The role of non- government institutions has also been discussed. The newsletter articles will give the readers a good idea of how the South Asian countries have been dealing with their geopolitical predicaments during the pandemic.

The next issue of the Clips will come up next month. We will try to highlight important issues around the world in the upcoming issues.

Have a good read, and stay safe!

Zillur Rahman

