

Covid-19 and Pandemic Politics

Conceptualizing the South Asian Experience

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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

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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

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.

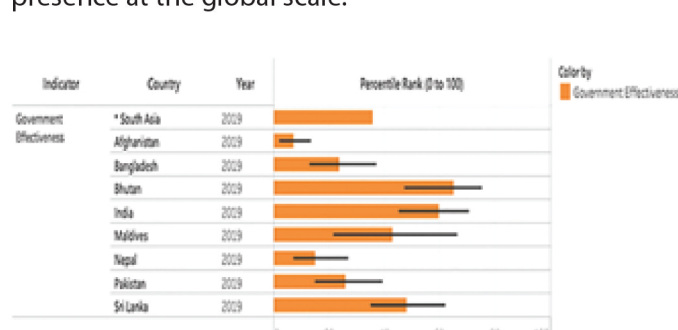
³ Meyer, B. (2020) ‘Pandemic Populism: An Analysis of Populist Leaders’ Responses to Covid-19’, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. Available at: <https://institute.global/policy/pandemic-populism-analysis-populist-leaders-responses-covid-19>

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

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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⁴ The 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/>

⁵ The 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>