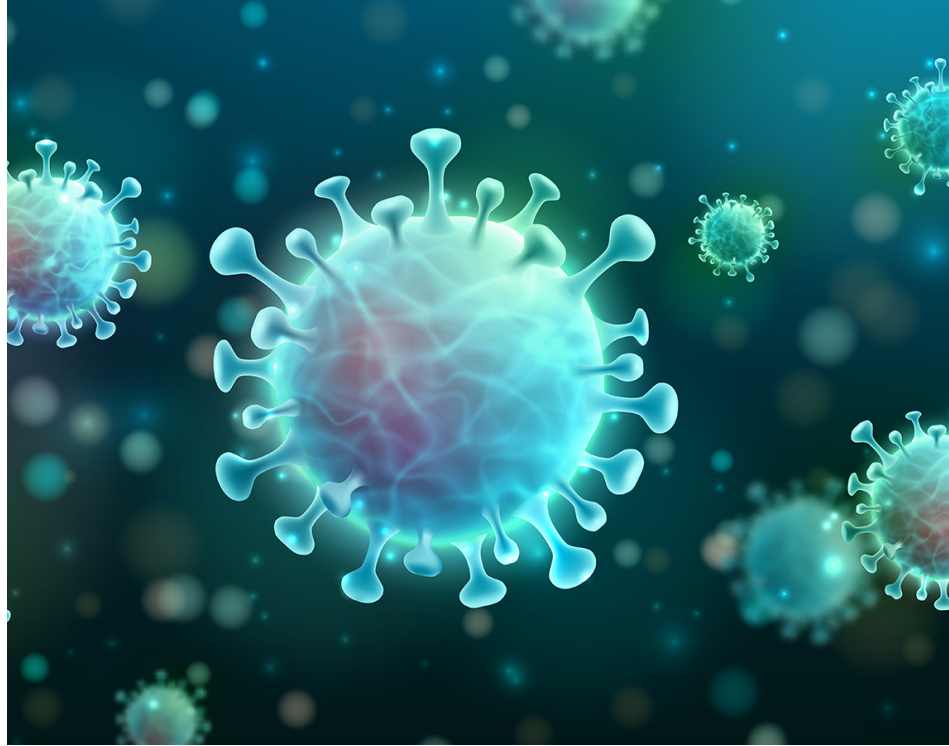


Democracy in the Times of COVID19



By Vineet John Samuel

Photo: ISTOCK

March 11, 2020 saw the Director General of the World Health Organization declare the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus a pandemic. This classification sent waves of alarm around the world, and forced both, state machinery and civil society, to begin an operation of testing, containment and treatment at a scale that the world has not witnessed in several decades.

By the 3rd of April, 2020, the world had registered more than a million cases of COVID-19 (popularly referred to as the Coronavirus) and had lost more than 53,000 people to it. The exponential rise in cases caught most government machinery unaware and the responses that followed had varying degrees of success. Global diversity of context meant that these responses were highly localized, with differing policy priorities.

With the rapidly climbing number of cases however, a common thread in policy responses has been the curbing of certain freedoms, to implement policy measures like lockdowns, and quarantines that are critical to containing the spread.

Here, countries have looked to imbibe lessons in best practices from each other and two particular countries, namely South Korea and China, have drawn more attention than others.

The first model, implemented by China, has seen the virus effectively contained inside the quarantined state of Hubei. This model, advocates the call for a total lock down and government enforced quarantines in regions that have individual who have been infected by the virus. The second approach, pioneered by South Korea is one that looks to combat the virus by the provisioning of massive free testing and treatment, which not only allowed for containment but kept mortality rates below 1%.

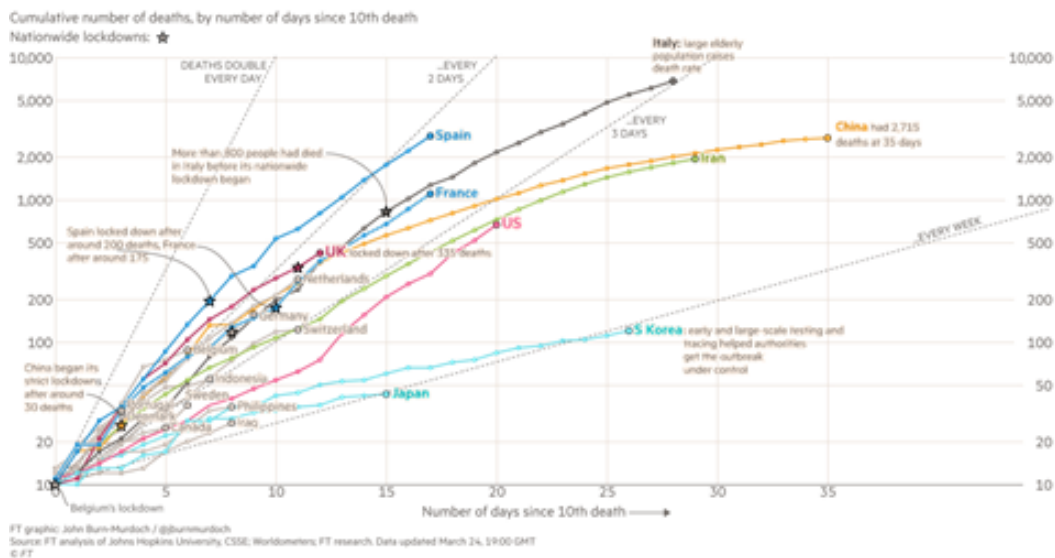
As the world looks to emulate both these models however, it is critical that we keep in mind that the protection of human lives must not come at the cost of fundamental democratic rights and that we must strike a fine balance between the restriction of rights and the deployment of essential life-saving policy measures.

**voices of
democracy
in asia**



A PUBLICATION SERIES: 001

www.adnasia.org | 1



As conscientious believers in substantive democracy, we must look to develop a policy framework that learns the best practices of nations, but does so while protecting rights and steering clear of practices that are anti-democratic.

Authoritarian practices, a lack of transparency and a lack of accountability will only serve to further distress a populace that is besieged by the virus. Hence any mechanism that is formulated and deployed must look to incorporate democratic values of transparency, accountability and equity, as a means of developing a solution that is both viable and effective.

Fostering Transparency and Minimizing Information Asymmetry

One of the first democratic values that must be protected when developing solutions for health epidemics is that of transparency. Transparency as a value derives its strength from the democratic principle that all citizens within a country have a right to information about the policies designed to govern them. In times of the crisis, citizens have a right to access accurate and consistent information, not only about government action, but also about the exact scale, nature and origins of the virus.

For a crisis of global proportions, our understanding of transparency must also be reinterpreted globally, enabling the free flow of information between borders. Information sharing here, must not be limited to government to government interactions, but also by protecting the rights of international journalists and enabling them to transmit news to their global audiences.

Transparency here, is hence as much a principled imperative as much as it is key to aiding the iterative improvement in global responses.

Ensuring Accountability

As a democratic principle, accountability can only be guaranteed when transparency is maintained. This principle emerges from the belief that the government bears direct responsibility for any actions taken by it, and that citizens have a right to hold their democratically elected governments to account for any such action.

Key to ensuring such accountability is the protection of fundamental rights. Most relevant among these rights is the freedom of expression that enables and protects citizens who look to hold their respective governments accountable.

In furtherance of the same rights is the protection afforded to journalists and members of civil society, who look to report and question government action in times of crisis. Accountability can only be fostered when citizens are free to question their governments, and at a time when citizens are at their most vulnerable, curbing these rights will only serve to further disenfranchise them.

Promoting Equity

At a time when there is a secular threat to individual lives, it is critical that solutions are developed keeping in mind the principle of equity. Equity here refers to an equal access to healthcare and testing facilities. As a principle, it is founded on the belief that all human lives are equal and hence each individual has a right to healthcare.

The South Korean model proves that a commitment to massive free testing and treatment, is not only equitable, but also drastically reduces the spread of the virus and brings down mortality rates.

By removing barriers to healthcare, governments can maximize the reach of those within their respective healthcare nets, allowing them to contain and treat the virus before its progression to the stage of community transmission.

Conclusion

The Coronavirus has forced both government and civil society to expand capacity and operations to develop new and innovative solutions for containment, testing and treatment.

At a time of crisis, our commitment to this democratic ethic and its values must remain, and the world must come together to ensure that these values find themselves actualized in their response. The incorporation of the democratic principles of transparency, accountability and equity, will only help in further strengthening our responses, and will prioritize the primary stakeholders in this crisis who are the citizens themselves.

"At a time of crisis, our commitment to this democratic ethic and its values must remain, and the world must come together to ensure that these values find themselves actualized in their response."

VINEET JOHN SAMUEL

AUTHOR, ADN FELLOW

"Vineet John Samuel, is the Asia Democracy Network Fellow at the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi. He has completed his Master's in Public Policy from the National Law School of India University and is a regular commentator on Social Policy, Economy and Civic Freedoms for publications across the Indian subcontinent."

