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Novel Coronavirus Crisis and Democracy in Southeast Asia

By HONNA Jun

1. Coronavirus Pandemic and Non-traditional Security Cooperation

The ongoing coronavirus pandemic of this year is perceived as an issue in the non-traditional security cooperation affairs. The non-traditional security is a concept of countering the threats posed by non-state actors' non-military threats ---drug cartels or terrorism--- that emerged particularly after the end of Cold War, by 'securitizing' the measure. Thus, it is differentiated from the traditional security affairs in which deals with the military threat posed by unamicable state actor. The infectious disease began to be 'securitized' since 9-11 attack in 2001 when there was increasing concern of bio-weapon to be used by terrorists. Then we have gained political lessons through the cases of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), and Avian flu epidemics. So the lessons are, first, states shall act collectively in dealing with the common threats like infectious disease ---what's most important is the regional cooperation. To promote regional cooperation, standardization of capability among concerned parties are required. Specifically, standardization required in legal and institutional areas, such as crisis communication, medical system, centralization of information, etc., as well as the system that complex stake-holders ---media, Non-governmental Organizations, volunteers--- can be part of the support. Without such standard among the states in the region, there would hardly be a regional common response nor cooperation.

Even with the lessons learned, the level of regional cooperation in ASEAN countries countering the coronavirus pandemic this time seems, unfortunately, not enough. For example, the ASEAN Health Ministers' Meeting was held on April 7 ---a quarter year had passed since the pandemic had gotten serious. That proved ASEAN did not prioritize sharing the understanding of the coronavirus crisis and cooperation to deal with it together. The ASEAN Summit was not held soon either. When it was finally held on July 14, the joint statement did not touch upon the cross border issues regarding the epidemic risks within the region. As seen, ASEAN leaders have prioritized their own bilateral ties with partners outside the region, rather than of within. Among ASEAN member states, therefore, non-traditional security affairs are not their priority agenda, which would lead to the regression of the ASEAN Centrality.

2. Political Dynamism in ASEAN amid Coronavirus Pandemic

Having said that, what they had in common in their action was that they over-securitized the pandemic situation, and oppressed their citizens' liberty in the name of state emergency. The following 7 countries are such cases:

(1) Singapore and Vietnam

Singapore and Vietnam were the role models in Southeast Asia in containing the coronavirus from spreading. Singapore, though, was criticized on its inhumane treatment of patients in mid-April when there was a cluster generated in immigrants' district. Then the government tightened its grip on media and cyberspace by Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), a kind of anti-fake news law established last year, to monitor and regulate independent media to control anti-government criticisms. Not clear how effective that was actually, though the ruling People's Action Party won the general election in July. In Vietnam, the authority designated the organizations that question the government statistics of coronavirus patients and related matters as terrorists, restrained the public gatherings or on Facebook under the cybersecurity law. They also regulated what the government designates as they like as the sensitive information or banned books from being posted on social media, by the fake news prohibition act established in April.

(2) Philippines and Cambodia

Philippine and Cambodia underestimated the risks of infection, and delayed responding the coronavirus at the beginning stage. In the Philippines, President Duterte kept making fun of coronavirus at an earlier phase, then it saw a rapid spread of the virus after seeing the first patient in mid-March, recorded the highest mortality rate per capita in ASEAN members by mid-April. In Cambodia, Prime Minister Hun Sen prioritized the bilateral relations with China, as he officially visited in early February, resulted the delay in responding to the spread of the virus. In both countries, the authorities responded harshly to the anti-government criticisms on delayed responses to the spread of the coronavirus in the country. In the Philippines, military and police were mobilized for the lockdown and curfew, and after the declaration of the state emergency, they were given the permission to fire to those who do not obey the government's order. Thanks to such a policy of fear, many citizens, said to be 120,000, were arrested. The anti-government major broadcasting station was banned to air. In Cambodia, the state emergency act was passed in the congress by Hun Sen administration in April. Since then, SNS communications are monitored, media are censored, and somehow, many ranking opposition party officials are arrested.

(3) Thailand and Myanmar

There were major changes in the politico-military relations in Thailand and Myanmar, respectively. In Thailand, the Prayut administration is legitimizing its oppressive domestic policy against anti-government activists, of which it has been taking since it has seized the power in 2014 through military coup d'état, in the name of counter-coronavirus measure. Despite the reports of organized, major corruptions during the general election last year, the authority has

been restraining such criticisms in the name of counter-coronavirus measure. For example, 'Covid-19 Response Center' was established after the declaration of the state emergency. At the Center, Prime Minister, military, and officials close to the Prime Minister have exclusive power in counter-coronavirus dealings, and some report that citizens are arbitrarily punished. In Myanmar, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi was in charge of 'Coronavirus Committee' at the beginning, until when the first patient in the country was found in later March. Then the military established 'The Anti-coronavirus Taskforce' and took over the control. Under the taskforce, media are censored as online regulation, and hundreds of news websites are blocked. As if to remind the military junta rule, public gatherings are prohibited. Meanwhile the military has been escalating the attack on minority armed groups, which is strongly criticized by the United Nations and others.

(4) Indonesia

Despite the highest mortality record in Southeast Asia of over 10,000 in the country, Indonesia has not taken as strict measures like lockdown as the abovementioned other members of ASEAN, but rather taken somewhat relaxed social restriction. Having prioritized to protect the tourism industry, the initial response in the country was not quick enough. It was only in later March that Joko administration declared the state emergency to call on its citizens to stay home, school to be closed and religious gatherings to be cancelled. Although, by the order of the police chief, cyber-censorship is effective: the anti-government criticisms are criminalized, the environmental NGOs' gatherings were cancelled based on the wiretapping intelligence collected, university student who criticized capitalism on the internet was arrested. Other remarkable phenomenon is the 'corona politics' that enabled the parliament take extra measures, by taking the advantage of the situation when citizens could not organize a mass anti-government demonstration: passing the laws that are not easy to do so in ordinary times, like on job creation, or delaying to pass the gender equalization in response to domestic violence.

3. Conclusion

As listed above, each of 7 countries among 10 ASEAN members varies in their polity, culture or ideology, as well as the impact from the spread of coronavirus. Though they are in common in legitimizing their regulation on media and socials in the name of providing legitimate information on coronavirus, at the cost of citizen's freedom of expression. The oppression then gives political elites wider authority to get their agenda done, otherwise not possible ---such incentives are commonly seen in those countries. In another aspect, the fight against coronavirus is transformed to combat anti-government activists ---coronavirus is regarded as a matter of regime security, not of public health or human security. Those are their paradigm in common.

It is too soon to judge whether these kinds of reactions are temporary things, democratic values would be reviewed at some point, or something irreversible. By observing those countries except Thailand, it seems that the drive for promoting democracy is weakening among them. It would be difficult to revive democracy in those countries without external factor. Supposed

guardian of democracy, the US Trump administration, does not seem to be interested in maintaining its duty. Therefore, regardless of the US presidential election result in November, it would be important for Japan, with an initiative, to try involving the US to promote democratic values.

(This is an English translation of an outline of the lecture delivered by HONNA Jun, Professor, Ritsumeikan University, at the 85th Policy Plenary Meeting of CEAC on September 28, 2020.)