

## **Political economic of COVID-19 situation in Thailand**

COVID-19 is an emerging airborne disease originated in Wuhan, China. The cause of COVID-19 comes from animals (bat). The most common symptoms are fever, dry cough, and tiredness since the virus slowly destroys lungs. On 12th January, the first case of COVID-19 in Thailand was founded (the patient was a tourist from Wuhan). The number of COVID-19 cases was increasingly hiking because of super spreaders from the boxing stadium (the event held by the military). Not only was Bangkok a danger zone of COVID-19, but also other commercial and business hub provinces.

On March 21th, the government forced all department stores and markets to shut down. After the government shut-down regulation, on 26th March, the government also declared an emergency decree aiming to prevent Thailand from further COVID-19 spreading. Still, The number of COVID-19 was increasing. In the very first April, the government declared curfew restricting people from going out at night (10 pm to 4 am) and the regulation that required people who travel to Thailand to quarantine from 14 days before entering the country (state quarantine). From the late April onwards, the number of COVID-19 patients increased in the decreasing rate. In the middle of May, the government decreased the lockdown policy to level two, enabling department stores and markets to reopen again (under social distancing manners). Moreover, no inside-country COVID-19 case was reported until now. And the lockdown policy has been relieved to level five (concerts, events, aesthetic clinics, bars, pubs, schools, and so on are allowed to reopen and run this business in social distancing manners). Even if the lockdown policy has been relieved, still, the government keeps extending the emergency decree. The authorities say that the purpose of the extension of the emergency decree is due to health-concern issues, not political issues. There are 3,404 confirmed cases in Thailand (27th August).

Detail of the emergency decree and its pro- and counter-argument

The emergency decree restricts people from going to COVID-19 danger zone, storing goods, gathering and protesting, and publishing fake news. The emergency decree is the key tool to prevent the spread of COVID-19 because the government can do what they want and it takes less time to be effective. The latest extension of the emergency decree is fruitful

because first, the law is needed in order to effectively prevent and solve the problem (i.e. control traveling in and outside the country, state quarantine, and investigate the COVID-19 suspected patients). Secondly, there should be a unity of department of disease control and integration with police and military to cope with the COVID-19 situation fast and effectively. Thirdly, the emergency decree is the important tools to achieve the new normal until the new law is enacted. Fourthly, it is said that Thai people ignore social distancing which may lead to the second wave of COVID-19. Lastly, there are many people waiting to enter the country for the purpose of business and education, the emergency decree will enable the government to deal with preventing the spread of the pandemic more effectively.

Thinking in a different perspective, there is a contradiction between COVID-19 situation in Thailand and the extension of the emergency decree. The emergency decree violates human rights, and lower level of freedom in terms of freedom to criticize and express his/her thoughts, freedom to investigate the power of government, politicians, and authorities, freedom from living his/her life he/she wants.

Moreover, it is more like the extension of the emergency decree is for the purpose of maintaining political stability not for the public health issues. Since, an emergency decree enables the government to have absolute power and do anything they want. The example case is students protesting against the current political party, dictatorship, and monarchy system. The authorities only arrest the leaders of protesters and people who strongly oppose the system and criticize the government and monarchy system. This case clearly shows that the arresting does not conduct in the purpose of preventing the spread of COVID-19. Since Thai people lose confidence for the current government . If the government does not take any action, they will definitely lose their power. This is to stay a little longer by exploiting the emergency decree. Linking to the policy theoretical framework, the government has to trade off between their own interest and public interest. The result is obvious, they choose their own interest.

Lastly, the emergency decree hold back the economy from growing especially in airline, hotel , tourism, retail, modern trade sector. By restrict the international flights as well as policy in domestic flights, the air travel sector is severely contracted. Moreover, many airline companies are filed for bankruptcy and drive them out of airline business. The hotel sector is expected to shrink by more than 65%. Occupancy rate for retail space drops sharply

to the lowest level in 8 years. Many companies have laid over their employees and cut wage. Consumer spending is weakened due to sharply decrease in income (result from the lockdown). Overall economic situation is depressed. The 2 months of lockdown could cost Thailand's economy THB 1 trn (in terms of global supply disruption, tourism revenues, domestic supply disruption, and multiplier effects. Consumer confidence index have decreased over time (from 67.3 in January to 49.2 in June). It can be interpreted that consumers lose confidence in current and future economic conditions, job prospects, and income expectations. It does not make any sense to prevent the spread by sacrificing this bad economic condition.

#### What government has done

In the good side, government tries to help tourism industry by launching the campaign 'เราเที่ยวด้วยกัน'. The government will subsidize THB 22.4 billion aiming to stimulate the tourism sector for 4 months during July to October, 2020). For individuals, the government supports 40% of hotel fees (or not exceeding THB3,000 each night) and 40% of plane tickets (not exceeding THB1,000 each seat). There are a lot of positive feedbacks from Thai people who are willing to travel. Apart from subsidies for the tourism industry, the government also implements COVID-19 remedy program by giving THB5,000 each month for 3 months to employees out of the social scheme program. However, the money are not well distributed to the right group of people who are in need of money and severely damaged from COVID-19 especially farmers. They are not tech savvy, and do not know how to register to this program.

Apart from the good side, there is a bad side that reflects the behavior and performance of the government. I will raise 2 cases to elaborate more on what government has done as well as link to the frameworks that I have learned in the class

First, the case of politicians hoard face masks. During the early and peak of COVID-19, face masks are very hard to find and very expensive. At first, I think it is because of excess demand and low production capacity. The truth is disclosed by หม่อมโพธิ์ดำ that is political and people with power and connections already buy all surgical face masks in the market. Moreover, there is a rumor that militaries take control over surgical face masks companies and restrict them from producing face masks to supply for the market. It turns out that หม่อมโพธิ์ดำ was arrested because of committing fraud while the group of people who

hoards surgical face masks (clearly, they are politicians) are not being punished because policies said it is rumors.

The norm of favoring people who benefit the most and people with ‘Nata’, ‘Kiat’, ‘Saksi’, ‘Chuesiang’, and ‘Barami’ have been instilled in our culture for a long time. This norm leads to corruption which will affect on slow development in terms of economic, and society. It can be seen clearly that people with connection can exploit resources with no punishment.

Second, the government gives privilege to nobles, authority, elite, and superstructure. It was reported that there are 2 COVID-19 cases found within the country even if there is no COVID-19 case within the country for so long. The daughter of a Sudan diplomat family was diagnosed with COVID-19. The diplomat family were not under state quarantine program but live in the condominium in Sukhumvit soi 26. Moreover, Egyptian militaries were also tested positive for COVID-19 and were caught shopping at the department store in Rayong during the quarantine period. It is not fair for that people because they have been maintained social distancing manner for so long to prevent from second wave but government welcome ruling class and give privilege to them. The government’s act to favor the ruling class may lead to the emergence of a second wave.

The COVID-19 pandemic shows the weakness of superstructure of Thai society. Thai government should give up their own interest and focus more on governance of the public as well as balance between preventing COVID-19 and maintaining economic stability. This suggestion sounds like a utopian idea that can not be achieved. However, we can not let this norm last any longer. The creative destruction can be applied in this case. Old norm (non-transparency and corruption) will be replaced by the new norm. The creation of a new norm requires that the old norm be eliminated, in this case, the political structure.

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