

GLOBAL SOUTH

REVIEW

Rethinking the Emergence and the Practice of Three Praetorian States in Southeast Asia: A Comparative Study between Indonesia, Myanmar and Thailand

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Global South Review (GSR)

Published by:

Institute of International Studies

Department of International Relations

Faculty of Social and Political Sciences



Global South Review is an academic journal published by Institute of International Studies on behalf of the Department of International Relations Universitas Gadjah Mada dedicated to provide academic and policy platform to exchange views, research findings, and dialogues within the Global South and between the Global North and the Global South. The Journal is designed to be a media to examine all the issues encountered by Global South in the context of current international justice, security, and order. Issued twice a year every June and December, contributors of the Journal are open for those who share concern on south – south cooperation.

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The editorial board of Global South Review would like to express our utmost gratitude to all the peer reviewers that participated in this edition's articles review process.

Editor's Note

Mohtar Mas'ood

The Year One of the COVID-19 pandemics has passed. All of us have undergone the same agony. Many of us may have derived some lessons from this calamity, albeit differently. The way I see it, three lessons stand out. The first lesson is that we tend to perceive the pandemic differently, depending on our identity. The different ways of seeing things resulted in different policies proposed. Secondly, the pandemic also impacted us all differently. And the third lesson is that the international regime that has been in place for almost a century failed, which does not work due to the lack of multilateral support.

Three Different Perspectives

A quick perusal of journalistic reports and scholarly analyses on the Covid-19 Pandemic reveals three-way of seeing things. **The first group** of writings focused on the micro-organism itself. And this is the biggest group. They tell us about the nature of the virus, its origin, mutations, its fatal effect on human life, and how to control it. This kind of analysis tends to see the determinants of health and illness as predominantly biological (Doyal, 1979:12). It also tends to believe that this problem will be solved by medical technology. This group perceives pandemic as a matter of technology and technocracy.

The second group consists of those who discussed the human behavioral dimension. There have been debates in this literature about the role of reckless human lifestyle in making the virus spread rapidly and about the need to discipline the way humans interact with each other.

These two perspectives are the most popular among the governments as well the public in general. At the practical policy level, the logical implication is that if you can get the vaccine and control the behavior of your people you will survive this calamity. And that is what most governments everywhere are doing right now. Find the cure and discipline the population. That is the “battle cry.”

Meanwhile, there is a **third group** that considers more seriously the socio-political-economic factors surrounding the pandemic. According to those who adopt this perspective, although they may appear as natural, random phenomena, “all epidemics are ‘social events’” (Stark 1977). It means that epidemics are not natural, they have something to do with the way we manage relations among humans.

Having observed health problems facing many countries in the Global South, Laurence Ray suggested that “the present global economic and social order is pathogenic” (Ray, 1989:245). Within the current economic and social order, which is mostly Neo-liberal capitalist, “medicine tends to individualize disease, . . . (I)n reality, many major risks to health are socially produced: malnutrition, pollution, radiation, occupational disease, overcrowding, lack of sanitation, etc., and they are in the main preventable.” (Ray, 1989:245). The lack of public health policy might explain why the people in the Global South have been knocked down several times by the outbreak of several epidemics or pandemics in the last hundred years: malaria, cholera, variety of influenza, Ebola, et cetera.

The point here is that epidemics or pandemics are partly the results of policy choice of “individualizing disease” (instead of socializing disease) and privatizing health services (instead of promoting public health services). As noted by Andre-Jacques Neusy (2004): “Billions of international health dollars are spent fighting pandemics, while the impotent health infrastructure that contributed to the pandemics’ growth and cost remains chronically underfunded” (Neusy, 2004). This kind of incongruity is common in many countries of the Global South.

The Survival of the Strong

The COVID-19 pandemic also resulted in different impacts on different people. Just as is the case with other global phenomena, power matters. Those who have more, have been impacted less. While those who have less, have been suffered more badly. It sounds like a truism, but it is a fact that the world has been unequal in many dimensions. In the context of worsening global socio-economic inequality (OXFAM, 2019), the COVID-19 pandemic has produced a different impact on those who are powerful and who is not. Consequently, we need different strategies for mitigation for different groups. The needs of the “Global South” must be different from the “Global North”.

One of the important roles of the state during a crisis is to provide life-preserving public policy for the people. It has been known that there has been a divergence in this matter between the Global South and the Global North. The COVID-19 pandemic only makes it worse. Even the “South” within the Global North also suffered. According to the United Kingdom’s Office of National Statistics:

“Even within the Global North this divide registers, where the most excluded, the least able to cope – those with learning needs, the elderly in care homes and refugee populations – have become the most exposed to the virus and the least protected. In terms of mortality, one key fact . . . is brutal – people suffering socioeconomic deprivation are twice as likely to die of COVID-19 (ONS, 2020b).

The challenges that the pandemic has created regarding global inequality has also been noted by the United Nations’ World Economic Situation and Prospects as of Mid-2020:

The pandemic has unleashed a health and economic crisis unprecedented in scope and magnitude. Lockdowns and the closing of national borders enforced by governments have paralyzed economic activities across the board, laying off millions of workers worldwide . . . The possibility of a slow recovery and prolonged economic slump—with rising poverty and inequality—looms large. (Quoted in McCann & Matenga, 2020:163)

The Struggling Multilateralism

The lesson we learned here is that the current pandemic resonated an old axiom that this is part of the “struggle for control over resources,” the essence of world politics. We cannot deny it. The way we manage world politics is somehow still haunted by the Realist maxim. As predicted by the Realists, in dealing with the pandemic, countries generally look after their people. Those with

the technological capacity to produce a vaccine, like the United States and China, also prioritize their folks. Multilateralism is the road not taken.

According to international observers, this tendency to shy away from multilateralism has been there for some time. The greatest power of the world failed to live up to the multilateral scheme called the “Kyoto Protocol”. As the result of the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate, the protocol was designed to commit state parties to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The United States failed to support the environmental protocol.

In 2012, Harvard University professor, Ian Bremmer, already noted this phenomenon in his book *Every Nation for Itself*. According to Bremmer, the mechanism for global management of common world affairs did not work. No leadership; lack of cooperation between states; and institutional paralysis within major global institutions. Countries were unable to deal with non-traditional security challenges, like pandemics. While multilateral groups were tackling common global issues, like G-8, G-10, G-20, etc., he called the current condition “G-Zero”. Now we see that the World Health Organization is unable to lead the fight for healing, simply because the great powers do not let WHO work, they do not support multilateralism. They want to do it their way.

The Way Ahead?

The Realist perspective is good in describing the political world. But not necessarily reliable for prescriptive purposes. If we believe that cooperation is necessary, especially in multilateral groupings, then we need to refresh our perspective on this issue. We need a perspective prone to collaboration. Multilateral endeavor to deal with global crises is a must for the less powerful like most Global South countries are. As the popular motto put it, “organization is the weapon of the weak. With this long preface, I would like to present the articles written by bright young scholars that entrusted their scholarly works to be published in this journal. It is an honor for the editors to make their writings publicly known.

Enjoy the readings.

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