

## Feature Article

# COVID-19: Thailand Report

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The COVID-19 pandemic is well underway and there is no substantial news to assure us, as of now, that it is going to subside soon. Intensive worldwide efforts are now focused on finding ways to combat it, but we will have to wait and see how it turns out. Meanwhile, the world's population must follow the routine of physical distancing, which by now has become the “new” normal.

In this brief note, I will tell you my perspective on Thailand's relative success in containing the pandemic within its borders. It was rather unlikely for Thailand to be in this position being the first country that contracted the disease outside of China with Chinese tourists still welcomed into the country well until early March. In mid-January, a Chinese tourist was reportedly admitted to a

hospital in Bangkok.<sup>1</sup> The first local transmission occurred a month later when a taxi driver contracted the disease, reportedly from having Chinese tourist fares. With these events, the efforts to contain the transmission were underway.

The government finally declared a state of emergency in March. At first, the measures were stringent. A nationwide curfew was imposed from 10 pm to 4 am. Entertainment venues, such as pubs, bars, karaoke lounges, massage parlors, etc. were all closed. Shopping malls were also closed with the exception of the supermarket for purchasing food and other essential items. Non-essential foreign travel was restricted with allowances only for trips by foreign diplomats, the delivery of necessary goods, and so on. During this time, I recall all of Bangkok's streets being eerily quiet. This was highly unusual in a constantly bustling city.

The emergency decree was declared by a nominally "democratic" government. I say this because the present Constitution that was proclaimed in 2017 contains many provisions that are considered "undemocratic." The clearest example is the existence of the Upper House whose members are directly appointed by the present prime minister. These members were appointed during his post as the head of the military junta that ruled the country

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Cheung, "Wuhan Pneumonia: Thailand Confirms First Case of Wuhan Virus outside China," *South China Morning Post*, January 13, 2020, accessed August 5, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/3045902/wuhan-pneumonia-thailand-confirms-first-case>.

and during the Constitution's drafting and eventual proclamation. The Upper House has the power of electing the prime minister when the Parliament is convened for the first time. It has 250 members, almost all of whom are retired military officers with close ties to the current prime minister. It acts as a powerful voting bloc and virtually guarantees that the current prime minister always gets elected. It is under this nominally democratic atmosphere that the emergency decree was passed. There had been a rather strong undercurrent of protests against the new government. The political atmosphere was poised to intensify at the beginning of 2020 because the Constitutional Court dissolved one of the opposition parties under suspicious circumstances.

Nonetheless, there were minimal protests against the emergency decree. Even the opponents of the current regime thought that the decree was passed with the interests and health of the people in mind. The traditionally reverent attitude of Thai people toward doctors and other figures of authority contributed to this generally compliant attitude toward the government. But as the steadily brewing protests demonstrate, Thai people are dissatisfied with being ruled by illegitimate governments. But when the pandemic hit, the people put their protests on hold; it is clear they will resume the protests as soon as it becomes practical to do so.

Moreover, the government has been accused of using the pandemic to bolster its power. Through the emergency decree, the government effectively shut down all forms of

political protests for many months. Students who gathered to demonstrate against the government or their totalitarian schools were quickly rounded up and arrested for violating the decree. The government's intention in these arrests appears to be benign, prioritizing the students' health with the increased risk of infection in large gatherings. However, it is easy to remain suspicious that this is not their only intention.

The situation has become more serious in the past few weeks. Perhaps the government is a victim of its own success. With the country's relative success in containing the virus, the rationale for continued implementation of the emergency decree becomes weaker and weaker. On July 18, 2020, students decided to gather in a much larger group at the Democracy Monument, a potent symbol of democracy in the country. The turnout was larger than many had expected. Again, the government used the provisions of the emergency decree to try to contain the group. However, with the gravity of COVID-19 receding in the people's consciousness because of a lack of new cases in the country or the low case count (fewer than ten new cases have been reported in the country for about a month now),<sup>2</sup> the people's attention turned toward pressing political issues.

However, to say that the Thai government is a "victim of its own success" is not entirely accurate. Many are of the opinion that the Prayuth administration is inept and has

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<sup>2</sup> See Thailand's COVID-19 statistics at <https://covid19.ddc.moph.go.th/en>.

fumbled several times in handling the pandemic that they should not be credited with its success. Instead, the credit should go to the Thai people themselves—doctors, nurses, the general public, especially over a million village health volunteers who play a key role in raising awareness and mobilizing the people to fight the disease. The ineptitude of the current government has been meticulously described by Pavin Chachavalpongpun in a recent article.<sup>3</sup> What is missing in his article though is an account of how Thailand has become successful in preventing a large-scale transmission of COVID-19 while having an inept and only nominally democratic government.

Despite the shortcomings of the Prayuth administration, it fortunately knows how to listen to its doctors. Experienced teams of doctors who have handled previous epidemics got together and demanded that the politicians follow their advice. In March, Prime Minister Prayuth called a series of meetings with these doctors, many of whom are well-recognized experts in the field. This meeting resulted in the passing of the emergency decree. Many provisions in the decree followed the recommendations of these experts, some of whom had earlier voiced their opinions to the public via social media.

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<sup>3</sup> Pavin Chachavalpongpun, “COVID-19 Attacks the Regime: A Case of Thailand,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 18, no. 15 (August 1, 2020), <https://apjjf.org/2020/15/Chachavalpongpun.html>.

Evidently, the renewal of political protests in Thailand is a result of Thai authorities becoming a victim of their own success. However, for this to be possible there must be some mechanisms by which the disease has been contained. One such measure is the ubiquitous wearing of face masks.

With a few exceptions, people wearing face masks is now a common sight in Thailand. Even schoolchildren have their masks on when they go to school. Much research has shown that face masks are effective in preventing the spread of the disease. However, the emergency decree in Thailand does not require the people to wear one. The government even issued a notice informing the public that the 2,000 baht fine for those who do not wear a mask outdoors is in fact fake news. It emphasized that the nationwide decree does not require the people to wear a face mask. However, there was a local issue concerning some provincial governors who ordered the people in their provinces to wear a mask and added a penalty for non-compliance.

The question now is: What makes Thai people so compliant in wearing a face mask even though there is no explicit law requiring them to do so? One answer would be: social expectation. When everyone wears a mask, anyone not wearing one will be given a puzzled, if not judgmental look, sending them the message that they need to put on a mask. Perhaps everybody realizes that doing so is a good thing, not only for themselves but for everybody else too. In fact, even before the pandemic many Thai people were already wearing a face mask.

A few weeks before the pandemic, the country was hit by the PM2.5 pollution problem. Traffic congestion in Bangkok resulted in a high amount of very small particles being released into the air. Around the end of 2019, the situation became so serious that the sky of Bangkok turned yellow. Many people protected themselves by wearing a mask, making it likely that the habit carried over when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Now, their reason is not only to protect themselves against the PM2.5 particles or the coronavirus but to prevent others from infection and to prevent the overall situation from worsening. With these consequent events, wearing a mask has become routine. Everybody has his or her own mask and wears it every time as if the mask has become part of their daily apparel.

I asked a friend of mine why she and other Thais are always wearing masks. She answered that by wearing a mask she feels safe and can contribute to society's safety, indicating that it is "good manners." Good manners express a society's expectations from its members such as not spitting on the streets or covering one's mouth before coughing. In Thailand, going out in public wearing a face mask is good manners. It is as if Thai people collectively have a sense that the wellbeing of an individual depends on everyone. We all have to do our part to help and protect one another.

This collective sense of wellbeing contrasts with many Western countries that tend to view wearing a face mask with suspicion. When the pandemic started to spread worldwide, many Thais who live in Europe started to wear a

mask. However, they were shouted at and even ridiculed by Europeans who tend to equate wearing a mask with being sick or at least having undesirable and unacceptable traits. This is diametrically opposed to the attitude of Thai people and shows clearly how culture plays a key role in a country's response to the threat of the pandemic. Moreover, even in the European countries where wearing masks was first frowned upon, the negative attitude soon changed. This change largely came about when these countries were hit hard by the pandemic and when it became clear that wearing a mask is effective in preventing the spread of infection and in protecting oneself and one's loved ones. In Italy and Spain, where the pandemic has been particularly serious, wearing a mask is now acceptable and even mandatory (with public approval).<sup>4</sup>

Another factor that greatly contributes to Thailand's success in fighting the pandemic is the presence of more than a million health volunteers at every corner of the Kingdom. The volunteers are ordinary villagers who are selected by their peers to help coordinate public health efforts in their community. First implemented in 1978, the idea was for the villagers to help themselves in public health matters and to act as intermediaries between the villagers

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<sup>4</sup> Emma Beswick, "Coronavirus: How the Wearing of Face Masks has Exposed a Divided Europe," *Euronews*, July 15, 2020, accessed August 5, 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/07/14/coronavirus-how-the-wearing-of-face-masks-has-exposed-a-divided-europe>.



and the medical professionals.<sup>5</sup> Now, every village has several volunteers who are very active in connecting the villagers with the public health authorities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of the volunteers was a key factor in Thailand's success in keeping down the number of infections. The volunteers go to each house and inform the people how to protect themselves from the virus and how to maintain general hygiene such as wearing a face mask, washing their hands, and practicing physical distancing.<sup>6</sup> The role of the village health volunteers shows that there is a high level of connection and cooperation between the public health authorities and the Thai people. This strong connection translates into an effective combatting of the pandemic despite the Prayuth administration's inconsistent and fluctuating handling of the situation.<sup>7</sup>

In conclusion, Thailand has been relatively successful in preventing the spread of the pandemic because of its culture and its strong connection with the people (especially with

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<sup>5</sup> For more information on the role of the Thai village health volunteers, see Phudit Tejavivaddhana et al, "The Roles of Village Health Volunteers: COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Thailand," *Asia Pacific Journal of Health Management* 15, no. 3 (2020): 18–22, <https://doi.org/10.24083/apjhm.v15i3.477>.

<sup>6</sup> Kittiporn Nawsuan, Noppcha Singweratham, Phayong Thepaksorn, "Compositions and Indicators for Successful Implementation of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) in the Community of Village Health Volunteers (VHVs) in Thailand," *The Southern College Network Journal of Nursing and Public Health* 7, no. 2 (May–August 2020), <https://he01.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/snet/article/view/242083>.

<sup>7</sup> Chachavalpongpun, "COVID-19 Attacks the Regime."

their public health authorities and village health volunteers). This culture of respecting health workers and caring for the community explains why Thai people unquestioningly comply with the doctor's orders and willingly wear face masks in public even though it isn't mandatory. There is thus a paradoxical situation when Thai people in other areas exercise deviance as they tend to ignore traffic rules, which causes a lot of road accidents. In some areas (such as traffic rules) Thai people do not seem to pay attention to the rules, but in others (such as in public health) they basically follow the instructions and advice of health workers. This paradox is rather puzzling and merits further research to see why this is indeed the case.

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