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Anna Pivovarchuk (Co-Founder & Deputy Managing Editor)

Fair Observer | 237 Hamilton Ave | Mountain View | CA 94043 | USA
www.fairobserver.com | info@fairobserver.com

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Narendra Modi Is Fighting COVID-19 With Little Logic

Satish Jha

May 1, 2020

The government's draconian actions are erratic, autocratic and causing much misery in India.

On April 5, India responded to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call to light earthen lamps for nine minutes at 9 pm. Earlier on March 19, he appealed for a 14-hour "people's curfew" three days later. On March 25, Modi imposed a national lockdown over 1.3 billion people, the biggest such exercise in the world.

Modi might have been decisive in announcing a lockdown, but India's health care system is utterly unprepared for the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19. As of April 6, India had reported less than 4,300 infected cases and tested only 130,000. This amounted to a mere 93 tests per million and only three cases per million, one of the lowest ratios in the world. These numbers have since changed, but the ratios remain low and have become the subject of controversy.

Little Rationale to Modi's Actions

A century ago, Modi's response to COVID-9 may have been simply fine. The world had few tools to deal with pandemics. A blanket approach, a bit like carpet bombing during wartime, seemed sensible. Today, our knowledge has evolved, and a more sophisticated response is possible, even though we are still learning about the disease.

Even from a century-old perspective, one aspect of Modi's response was little short of comic. The idea of a people's curfew was a cruel joke on the people because it was, in reality, mandatory. He did little but prove to the world that his diktat could bring the wheels of the nation to a grinding halt.

In the past, social activist Anna Hazare brought India to a halt in his anti-corruption movement in 2011. George Fernandes, a socialist politician, did the same in a different way. As the leader of the railway workers union, he brought trains to a standstill in 1974. His slogan, "Better Jail Than Rail," galvanized workers agitating for better pay and working conditions. Purportedly, this strike gave Indira Gandhi the idea of imposing a state of emergency on the country in 1975. Each of these actions could be said to have a rationale.

In contrast, Modi's "people's curfew" lacked rhyme or reason. Any effective quarantine had to be for the duration of the lifecycle of the virus. Anything less would have been meaningless and futile. And just clapping for anyone, including health workers, without giving them adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) or resources, was childish. Using the policemen who do not consider their paymasters — the citizens — to be any better than street dogs to impose the curfew was little short of sadistic.

Considering Modi had a few days to think through the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis, I would have expected him to come up with a strategic plan. Instead, on March 24, he sprang on the nation a complete lockdown, demonstrating that his government had lost all policymaking instincts necessary to run a nation.

Since March 24, I have been examining successive gaffes of Modi's time in power since 2014. One policy announcement after another has been the government's modus operandi. Little attention was paid to implementation. Most announcements have thus remained mere announcements and few policies have achieved even 50% of the targets he set for them.

Part of a Familiar Pattern

Modi's COVID-19 policy follows the same pattern of his time in office. It was simply not thought through. It had no reference point. It had no understanding of what it takes to achieve the targets he wanted to set. It was a knee-jerk

reaction that completely failed to anticipate the consequences of its action.

A reasonable policy response would have involved stopping the virus from being imported from outside the country, stopping the infection from spreading within the country, treating the patients who were identified and preparing for a surge of cases. On February 4, the Modi government stopped all travel from China to India, four days after the US did the same. By then, some asymptomatic carriers of COVID-19 might have already entered India and it may have taken four to five weeks before they were identified.

India began tightening restrictions on travel from outside India by the end of the second week of March. This might have been a little late. More importantly, not creating facilities for testing all incoming passengers was unwise. After all, anyone coming from high-risk countries — Indian citizens and foreign ones — presented a risk. The Modi government displayed much ineptness in the early days in managing the fast-emerging pandemic.

Under any administration, creating testing facilities for travelers from all high-risk countries would have been a top priority. Enforcing quarantines on those infected or suspected of being infected was the next step. Making tests available to anyone suspected of symptoms, minimizing domestic travel and ensuring the provision of basic services to citizens were other important actions.

Instead of locking down the whole country, keeping a watch on where cases of the coronavirus surfaced and quarantining the local inhabitants as well as screening all may have been potentially at risk was the more sensible course of action. Letting essential services run, including trains, buses and planes at a certain basic level, was preferable to a complete lockdown. The people who were traveling could have been tested and traced.

As in South Korea, India could have asked its people not to leave home without a mask and disposable gloves, as well as emphasized that

they wash their hands frequently to limit the spread of infection. An ideal solution could have been to design a face-shield, transparent, light and reusable that stayed fastened to the face since the real danger in this comes from touching the face. That could have become India's contribution to handling a crisis such as COVID-19 innovatively.

Instead, Modi announced a draconian lockdown, giving Indians a laughably short window of a couple of hours to prepare. People had no time to adjust to the new realities, reminding everyone of the 2016 demonetization fiasco that saw banknotes abruptly withdrawn from circulation. His policy failed to account for issues that inevitably surfaced later. How would the vulnerable access medical care or get medicines? How would people, especially the poor, get food?

Modi put the mythical Lakshman Rekha — a line that one cannot transgress — at everyone's doorstep, inflicting much misery on his people. The people who are hurting the most are daily wage workers. They buy their food with daily earnings and have little or no savings to live by. Thousands of them set out to walk hundreds of kilometers home. En route, the police and district authorities sprayed them with chemicals to disinfect them, treating them worse than animals. Some died on the way.

As per a much-quoted adage, there are many ways to skin a cat. No policy solution works perfectly against COVID-19. However, people in a democracy can expect the government to work for them, at least in a crisis. The government must treat its people — rich or poor, weak or strong, young or old, regardless of their religion or caste, their origins in a village or a city — with respect. Staffed by incompetent sycophants, the Modi government has miserably failed to do so.

The government could easily have kept the basic economic infrastructure running. Of course, it would operate at a lower activity level. Instead, the police beat first and ask questions later. Even delivery personnel of essential services like food and medicine are not spared. Modi has been in

power for more than 70 months out of the 70 years India has been a republic. He is a charismatic Pied Piper who won his election promising good governance. Yet he is now running the worst government in India's post-independence history.

***Satish Jha** co-founded the national daily Jansatta for The Indian Express and later was the editor of newsweekly Dinamaan of The Times of India Group.

Brazil Struggles to Find a Unified Approach to the Coronavirus Pandemic

Thiago Alves Ferreira & Stephanie Fillion
May 5, 2020

President Jair Bolsonaro needs to prove to the people of Brazil that he has an actual plan to address the COVID-19 crisis.

Brazil's President Jair Messias Bolsonaro seems to be trying to go down a different route than the rest of the world when it comes to the COVID-19 crisis. While the "Trump of the Tropics" has been following US policy on many fronts, Donald Trump has stepped back from his earlier claims that the coronavirus is a "hoax" and implemented strict containment measures across the United States. Bolsonaro, however, has continued his attacks on social distancing and other lockdown measures introduced by local governments, playing down the crisis and disregarding safety regulations.

Brazil's first case of COVID-19 was officially reported on February 25, in the metropolis of Sao Paulo. The infected patient had recently returned from a trip to Lombardy, in northern Italy, which soon became the epicenter of the outbreak outside China. As elsewhere, the total number of cases has been growing exponentially. The current testing policy already places Brazil in the top 10 countries with most confirmed cases. At

the time of writing, Brazil has over 100,000 confirmed cases and at least 7,000 deaths.

On strategy, Bolsonaro is going down the Swedish route, despite the fact that Stockholm is yet to prove the effectiveness of its approach. When it comes to communication, however, Bolsonaro stands in a league of his own. As Brazil's death toll crossed the 5,000-threshold last week, Bolsonaro told reporters: "So what? I'm sorry. What do you want me to do? I'm Messiah but I can't perform miracles." This "humorous" tone dates back from early March, when Bolsonaro, replying to reporters' questions on the possibility of a lockdown, said: "I'm sorry, some people will die, they will die, that's life. You can't stop a car factory because of traffic deaths."

Federal Versus Local

Not all Brazilian governors and mayors agree, however. As a federal republic, Brazil grants its states a large degree of autonomy. This autonomy is at the heart of the current political crisis, as federal government initiatives and rhetoric do not always align with measures undertaken on the local level. In Brasilia, the federal government is struggling to find its narrative, and it has been difficult for the president to convince his cabinet of an open policy approach. On April 16, the popular minister of health, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, was fired after a disagreement with Bolsonaro over the implementation of the guidelines set by the World Health Organization, transforming a health crisis into a truly political one.

Mandetta had attempted to align national policies with state and city-level initiatives, but the standoff cost him his job. The decision to fire him was viewed negatively by 64% of Brazilians, and Mandetta leaves office with 70% approval rating. Bolsonaro then nominated the oncologist Nelson Teich to the post, who now has the challenge of the century on his desk. The minister of health is expected to provide a solution that will end social distancing and get the economy back on track, all while containing the pandemic.

But Bolsonaro — who aligns with Trump on many fronts from political style to policy — has yet to define a clear and comprehensive approach to combat the pandemic. Different from the (albeit belated) US approach, Brazil failed to implement even the most common restrictions, such as on internal travel, or order mandatory social distancing or the temporary closure of shops.

While the policy of keeping the country open remains the official guideline, governors and mayors launched a myriad of initiatives to tackle the pandemic, from city-wide lockdowns to building temporary hospital facilities and setting \$100 fines for the elderly ignoring self-isolation mandates. The governor of Sao Paulo, Joao Doria, announced a lockdown of Brazil's most populous state and the country's economic and financial hub.

Sao Paulo's lockdown was heavily criticized by Bolsonaro on social media. On March 25, the president posted on Twitter a call for shops to reopen: "If companies do not produce, they won't pay salaries. If the economy collapses, public workers won't get paid either." But his words largely fell on deaf ears in Rio and many other states across the country.

Among his few initiatives, Bolsonaro recently requested congress to declare a state of emergency in order to unlock some additional federal funds to tackle the crisis but changed his stand a week later when he publicly criticized state governors and characterized their lockdown measures as extreme and harmful to the economy. He also announced some financial help to independent workers affected by the crisis, which caused people to crowd in front of banks to withdraw their allowance. Finally, he also started partnerships to produce masks in federal prisons and has so far repatriated 13,000 people.

From Stockholm to Brasilia

Bolsonaro is not alone. Other leaders around the globe have been prioritizing economic stability over adopting strict lockdowns to contain the virus. In Sweden, Prime Minister Stefan Löfven's

nationwide strategy relies on each citizen's responsibility to self-isolate if you exhibit any of the coronavirus symptoms. Sweden did not implement a lockdown as most other European countries have, instead limiting large gatherings to 50 people on April 24, closing universities and secondary schools to students over 16, and restricting visits to nursing homes.

As of May 3, 2,769 people have died in Sweden due to the coronavirus. This places Sweden, which has a population of 10 million, just below Canada — 3,727 deaths in a population of 37 million — or 14th globally. Sweden has also more deaths than its neighbors both in absolute numbers and in deaths per million (274 in Sweden, against 85 in Denmark, 43 in Finland and 39 in Norway). The argument, however, is that once countries begin to reopen, those with stricter lockdowns will see a second wave of infections while Sweden would have already surpassed it.

The core argument here is that lockdowns are not sustainable in the long run. Anders Tegnell, Sweden's chief epidemiologist, believes that, compared to its neighbors, Sweden will experience just one wave of infections, while other countries will have a second wave that will bring the numbers up. According to Tegnell, since COVID-19 will not be eradicated anytime soon, policies should focus on finding "sustainable solutions that keep the virus's circulation manageable for a long period to come." Therefore, the few restrictions imposed would be enough to "to slow down the spread of the virus to such an extent that the healthcare system and society won't collapse."

This theory is soon to be tested as Norway started reopening schools on April 27. A new peak in Norway would prove Sweden's position on the low effectiveness of lockdowns. But if Norway manages to contain the new spread, this would cast shadow to the credibility of Stockholm's approach.

Sweden and Brazil seem to align around voluntarism: Let people voluntarily take measures to protect those around them rather than

imposing a total lockdown, coupled with the belief that the health system can take care of those who need the most. Such a combination is believed to do less harm to the economy while at the same time limiting the health crisis.

The key difference between both governments is down to the rhetoric around COVID-19 and the actual ability of their health systems to absorb all patients in need. Tegnell defends the government's strategy for "a slow spread of infection [in order to] ensure that the health services have a reasonable workload." The public in Sweden seems to have complete trust in the health-care system to combat the epidemic. This is not the case in Brazil, where the media have shed a light on the risks the pandemic poses to those living in impoverished conditions, especially the favelas.

Although the Brazilian health system is universal and free, its limits are to be tested in the case of a spike in new infections. For instance, some of the smaller states already surpassed 90% of occupancy of intensive care units, which places doubt on the approach defended by Brasilia and justifies the measures taken by the governors in spite of the federal guidelines.

Bolsonomics

The economic concerns raised by President Bolsonaro are valid, but by focusing solely on the financial aspects of the crisis rather than the loss of life, Brazil risks going down a road of uncertainty and potentially even bigger economic problems. Brazil has reason to worry about the impact the virus will have on its fragile economy, which has seen stagnant growth and increased inflation, while the stock markets are crashing and the dollar exchange rate is at its highest level in history: Today, one US dollar costs 5.57 reais, a jump of 30% from the previous year.

On the financial front, Bolsonaro tried to approve a provisional rule aiming at addressing labor concerns, which caused protests among workers. Its Article 4 would allow employers to freeze job contracts for up to four months while also suspending salaries as long as the employee

was provided with some sort of training program in the meantime. This controversial article was later removed, while other key articles were retained. For instance, remote work is now more flexible when it comes to the provision of equipment (such as computers and an internet connection), which before was the employer's responsibility and now can "be set in agreement between parties."

Also, the employer can now decide whether to implement remote work or to simply consider the lockdown period as part of the annual paid leave, leaving little choice to employees. The government expects to prevent companies from firing workers with these flexible measures in place.

The Brazilian supreme court also requested the government to suspend the ongoing cuts to social benefits, specifically in the "Bolsa Familia" program inherited from Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's presidency. These cuts, which started before the crisis, were justified as an attempt to rebalance public expenses and to reevaluate such benefits as the government believes many of the beneficiaries do not meet the criteria. Bolsonaro later announced some direct cash to support independent workers during the crisis, from 200 reais proposed by the government to 600 reais approved by the Congress, or \$120, which currently corresponds to about 60% the national minimum wage.

What seems to be lacking in this crisis is effective communication. Although the management of the pandemic has not substantially impacted Bolsonaro's popularity, a recent poll shows that 51% think the president's attitude hurts the effort more than helping it. Bolsonaro has also been a strong defender, along with Trump (who has since backtracked on his earlier comments regarding its efficacy following failed trials) of the use of chloroquine against COVID-19. On April 8, Bolsonaro reminded his followers on Twitter that he has been preaching for chloroquine for the last 40 days.

Sweden's example may give some peace of mind to Brazilians who struggle to understand

their president's approach. The government might seem to be abandoning them, but maybe it is not, as one would not say the government in Sweden is abandoning its citizens. It seems, though, that Bolsonaro's approach, while relying so much on the economic argument, does not explain the reasoning behind it. This lack of clear communication on the government's intentions may be the reason why the no-lockdown policy is rejected by his ministers and governors, and also by the media and the population, as polls have shown.

High Stakes

Bolsonaro still needs to prove to the people of Brazil that he has an actual plan to address the crisis instead of initiating political disputes with state governors and mayors. As in the United States, most initiatives come from the federal states that have enough autonomy and flexibility to act on the necessary fronts to tackle the crisis. Bolsonaro is still to understand that he cannot unilaterally impose an approach he wants and that he will lose supporters if he is seen as the reason for the deepening of the crisis. Furthermore, his most vocal opponent in this health crisis, Governor Joao Doria of Sao Paulo, made little effort to hide his intentions to run in the 2022 election. Bolsonaro will soon understand that the coronavirus and the economic crisis which will follow have kick-started the election campaign.

If Brazil is to follow a policy of slow transmission, like Sweden, recruiting additional health-care workers, buying medical equipment to reinforce its health system and ensuring serious federal support to individual states will be imperative to ensure the country is not brought to its knees. Brasilia could also profit from closer cooperation with Sweden to both find justification locally — by implementing some positive measures instead of simply trying to ignore the problem — and internationally, by following Sweden's social experiment in a more concerted way.

The stakes are high, though. The US example proves that even with serious measures in place, whether timely or not, a country can still become the epicenter of the global pandemic with a fast-growing death toll. Unluckily for Bolsonaro, trying the Swedish model in Brazil — a country 22 times bigger in terms of population — is a bet the governors are not willing to take. Such a bold policy decision would need to be approved by the wider Brazilian public as a result of a broad and comprehensive discussion to assess the economic risks of the lockdowns vis-à-vis the risk of a substantial increase in deaths.

In either case, more discussion is warranted, and, as of now, the president seems to be avoiding any public scrutiny of government policy. Bolsonaro's new health minister already stated in a press conference held on April 30 that a flexibilization of social distancing is not desirable in the current situation. Changing ministers was not sufficient for Bolsonaro to sell his approach, and he might need to find new ways to get public support to his endeavors if he is still willing to defend them. Clearly more democracy, rather than less, seems to be the best way forward to find the way out of this crisis.

***Thiago Alves Ferreira** is a consultant in international affairs. **Stephanie Fillion** is a New York-based reporter.

COVID-19: What Indonesia Can Learn From South Korea and Taiwan

Luthfi Dhofier

May 5, 2020

For Indonesia, a total lockdown could have cataclysmic social and economic consequences. A different approach is needed.

As the coronavirus spreads fast in Indonesia, experts believe that the country will become Asia's new epicenter. President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo has

been criticized for not implementing a nationwide lockdown.

Yet such measures would not be a silver bullet to contain COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus. Other countries such as South Korea and Taiwan have flattened the curve while keeping businesses and schools open. Indonesia has a lot to learn from these two countries on how to contain the virus without locking down the whole country.

At the time of publishing, there have been over 12,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Indonesia and 870 deaths. Given the lack of widespread testing in a country with a population of 267 million, it is likely that the actual number of cases is far higher than this. According to a study by the University of Indonesia, there could be 1.5 million people infected and 140,000 deaths by the end of May.

Indonesia's Response to COVID-19

The Indonesian government's response to the crisis has been lackluster. At the beginning of the outbreak, Health Minister Terawan Agus Putranto famously said that Indonesians are immune to COVID-19 due to their prayers. He also publicly dismissed a report by Harvard researchers that projected infection rates in Indonesia. Similarly, Jokowi deliberately misinformed the public early on to prevent them from panicking.

In the past several weeks, the government has increased its containment measures. Jokowi has established a COVID-19 task force and declared a national emergency. However, experts believe that Indonesia is still behind the curve.

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the director-general of the World Health Organization, has also urged Jokowi to scale up Indonesia's COVID-19 response mechanisms. Others believe that the country must implement a nationwide lockdown instead of only a partial one. But Jokowi maintains that this is off the table as he believes there are economic, social, political and security aspects that must be considered.

Indeed, in countries with limited resources like Indonesia, a total lockdown could have devastating consequences such as mass poverty and social unrest. In some parts of Africa, lockdowns have contributed to a rise in violence and hunger.

Alternatively, Indonesia can learn from South Korea and Taiwan as these two countries have successfully contained the coronavirus without implementing a nationwide lockdown. To date, both countries have gradually removed some of the social distancing measures as the number of new infections goes down.

In South Korea, the infection rate has decreased from more than 900 cases a day to just under 10 cases per day. French President Emmanuel Macron and Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Lofven have both contacted South Korea's president, Moon Jae In, to seek advice on how to combat the virus.

Similarly, despite its close proximity to China (130 kilometers away), Taiwan has effectively managed the outbreak without drastic restrictions. In 2019, 2.71 million Chinese visitors traveled to Taiwan and, as of January, there were dozens of flights between Wuhan — the Chinese city where COVID-19 first emerged — and Taipei every week. Yet at the time of publishing, Taiwan only has 438 confirmed cases of COVID-19.

Learning From South Korea and Taiwan

There are some key principles that Indonesia can emulate from South Korea and Taiwan's response to the coronavirus pandemic.

First, Indonesia must commit to open and transparent communication. Officials in both South Korea and Taiwan hold daily media briefings to provide the public with timely, accurate and simple updates about the outbreak. Open and transparent communication can increase public engagement, prevent misinformation and stop people from panicking. As South Korea's Vice Health Minister Kim Gang-Lip suggested, "public participation must be secured through openness and transparency."

Second, Indonesia should incorporate advanced technology into its containment efforts. In South Korea, the government deployed a smartphone app to track the movements of those who have been ordered to self-quarantine. Additionally, travelers from China are required to download a self-diagnosis app to report their health conditions to the government.

In Taiwan, the government uses an “electronic fence” that utilizes mobile phone signals to track people who are ordered to self-isolate. To ensure compliance, officials receive an alert when cellphones are turned off for more than 15 minutes. The government also integrated databases owned by the National Health Insurance Administration, National Immigration Agency and the Customs Administration to monitor people’s travel and medical history. As more than 70% of Indonesians have access to the internet through mobile phones, the use of advanced technology can significantly improve the government’s containment measures.

Finally, Indonesia must improve its testing capacity. The country has one of the lowest testing rates in the world at 444 tests per 1 million people, compared with 12,488 in South Korea and 2,727 in Taiwan. Although Jokowi has repeatedly called for more testing, it remains to be seen whether or not Indonesia can boost its capacity. Widespread testing would provide reliable data to inform decision-making and enable the government to identify infection hotspots.

For Indonesia, a total lockdown could indeed have cataclysmic social and economic consequences. The country surely needs an alternative approach. Open and transparent communication with the public, combined with widespread testing and the use of advanced technology similar to what South Korea and Taiwan have demonstrated, can help Indonesia manage the pandemic.

***Luthfi Dhofier** is a policy analyst based in Vancouver, Canada.

Five Urgent Economic Reforms for India

Atul Singh & Manu Sharma
May 5, 2020

The COVID-19 crisis presents an opportunity to adopt new policies that leverage India’s domestic markets for industrialization, employment and growth.

US President Donald Trump had already taken a sledgehammer to the export-led growth model. With the COVID-19 pandemic rousing primal passions, hitherto unfashionable ideas are emerging like Dracula from their grave. Protecting infant industries to improve future competitive advantage or strategic players for national security reasons are policies many are embracing with gusto again. Some might argue protectionism never really went out of fashion, citing Boeing and Airbus as classic examples, but now many governments are treating masks and ventilators as national priorities. Clearly, a new zeitgeist is underway.

Why Did the Indian Elephant Move Slowly?

Like all economic systems, the post-World War II Bretton Woods order had winners and losers. Some benefited more than others. The US gave countries that opposed the Soviet Union and helped bring the demise of the Red Empire access to its capital, markets and even technology. As a Soviet ally, India benefited from the communist giant’s munificence but, even so, it remained trapped in the Hindu rate of growth and lagged behind Asian tigers allied to the US.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, India faced a balance of payments crisis. It had to fly out its gold reserves to London to secure dollars to keep the country going. With its Soviet godfather dead, New Delhi had no option but to liberalize its economy, releasing the stranglehold its infamous bureaucrats had maintained since independence in 1947. This stranglehold is popularly known as the Licence-Permit-Quota

Raj, which replaced the British Raj under India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.

The Indian economy, long compared to a lumbering elephant, broke into a run once businesses did not have to propitiate bureaucrats to the same degree as before. In particular, the services sector boomed with jobs in IT outsourcing growing rapidly and bringing in valuable export earnings.

Unlike China, though, India did not build infrastructure, develop manufacturing, generate employment and deliver prosperity in its economy. Its growth spurt was good when compared to the pre-1991 era but paled in comparison to its East Asian peers, especially China. The fruits of growth in India were more unevenly distributed as well, which reflected in its poor performance on the human development index.

Analysts theorized profusely about India's poor performance, blaming a range of factors from democracy to Hinduism. A few even criticized the British-created civil services, the holy cows of Indian society. While it is true that India's colonial bureaucracy is inefficient and corrupt, its judiciary is equally detrimental to the economy.

Due to the glacial pace of hearings, it takes 1,445 days to enforce a contract, and India ranks a lowly 163 out of a total of 188 countries. Activist judges have further increased risk and uncertainty in the economy. Both domestic players and foreign companies dread the kiss of death by Indian courts.

Politicians in India do not escape blame. Most are poorly-educated and are prisoners of the Nehruvian mindset. Like politicians elsewhere, their focus is on the next election. In contrast to British or German politicians, they are not as focused on the economy. They lack policy chops and instead rely on bureaucrats who almost invariably do not have economic training or business experience. Rarely do India's politicians seek impartial, honest advice.

Time for the Status Quo to Go

India's economic policies have to change. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the greatest crisis to the global economy since the Great Depression of 1929. With a population of more than 1.3 billion and still-widespread poverty, India has no choice but to act boldly and speedily. The authors propose that India adopts a five-prong policy to stimulate its economy.

First, the country must promote industry and turn the "Make in India" initiative into a reality. In 2017, information and communications technology (ICT) goods comprised more than 9.7% of India's imports and less than 0.9% of its exports. These ICT goods can and should be manufactured in India just as cars are. India must set up special manufacturing zones (SMZs) with liberal industrial permissions, land policy, transparent tax regimes and sovereign guarantees of policy stability.

There are numerous foreign companies who want access to Indian markets. India must welcome them with open arms on one condition: foreign players must manufacture domestically. This policy has already been tried in the car market, and players like Toyota, Honda, Suzuki, Kia and SAIC are manufacturing in the country. Companies in other sectors could do the same if India drafts a decent SMZ policy.

Of course, this policy would also be available to domestic firms. They could raise capital either domestically or through foreign capital markets. Theoretically, Indian players like Mahindra and Tata could export to developing countries around the world, especially in Africa, because conditions in these places are similar.

Some might ask how this policy is different from the Nehruvian model of import substitution. That policy protected the domestic industry, which was given a captive market to sell substandard goods, such as the legendary Ambassador car of Hindustan Motors. Domestic players never benchmarked their quality with their international peers and earned merry profits as crony capitalists, pleasing politicians and bureaucrats, not consumers who bought their products. This proposed policy welcomes every

leading global player to manufacture high-quality products in India for the Indian consumer.

It is important to remember that the Nehruvian policy of import substitution failed abysmally. Despite the Soviet Union selling oil at subsidized rates or giving it away through a barter system, the threat of a balance of payments crisis was never far away. India's energy imports kept growing, but it was unable to manufacture anything cheap enough or of high-quality to compete globally. As a result, exports lagged behind imports. If global players manufacture in India, that would cut down imports and sharpen the domestic ability to compete in the global export market.

Second, India's public sector is a sleeping giant that must be woken up. For decades, it has been used for patronage by politicians and bureaucrats. Officers of the heaven-born Indian Administrative Service (IAS) run businesses as diverse as Air India, the Food Corporation of India and Indian Tourism Development Corporation. They invariably have no industry expertise, guaranteed multi-decade careers and no penalty for failure. For example, Air India is in disarray, but no IAS officer who headed it has ever suffered any negative consequences. The same is true for every loss-making public sector unit that bleeds the taxpayer.

Many IAS officers like to compare themselves to American CEOs. They claim that the latter often lack industry expertise too. They forget that model has changed dramatically. Every internet giant is headed by CEOs who know their industry inside out. The days when Steve Jobs invited John Sculley of Pepsi fame to head Apple are long over. It is important to remember that, for all his success at Pepsi, Sculley nearly killed Apple. It was Jobs who revived Apple and made it the company it is today. Silicon Valley has not forgotten that bitter lesson.

Privatizing the public sector is an option but must be used judiciously. In a country with a history of crony capitalism, there is a danger of selling the family silver at fire-sale prices. The disastrous privatization of the public sector in

Russia is a warning to all former socialist countries, and India is no exception. Instead, professionalizing the public sector is the better policy choice. The Antrix Corporation, with its numerous successes in space technologies and services, is a shining exemplar for the rest of the public sector.

Managing directors like Rakesh Sashibhushan of Antrix and E. Sreedharan, the legendary engineer who built Konkan Railway and Delhi Metro, are the need of the hour. Top positions cannot be the birthright of IAS officers with no domain expertise. Instead, professional management with industry experience must run India's public sector. Public sector boards must change too. They must have people with varied, relevant skill sets, not bureaucrats or politicians or sycophants looking for sinecures.

The State Must Serve, Not Rule

Third, stakeholders such as manufacturers, traders and professionals must have a right to redressal of grievance against the government. Currently, Indian bureaucrats are utterly unaccountable. They can and do change policies on whims with little due process or notice, causing carnage. A petty clerk can sit over a file forever, delaying a tax refund or project clearance. India's British-designed bureaucracy is rentier in its DNA. It was supposed to suppress economic activity so that India would remain the supplier of raw materials and a market for British goods. That mentality persists and bureaucrats demand constant genuflection, if not outright bribes.

Furthermore, Indian bureaucrats wield far too much arbitrary power. Stakeholders can be falsely charged under confusing laws, indefinitely dragged to courts, lose their livelihood and perhaps lives with no accountability for the state or the wrongdoing bureaucrat. A doctor or accountant is liable for negligence under the law. The Indian bureaucrat is liable for nothing. Till today, the goods and services tax (GST) filing system remains glitchy. If a small trader's tax was not refunded in time, turning his or her cash

flow issue into a solvency one, then the official responsible for the delay must face some penalty.

In a system with interminable delays, every bureaucrat must have a time limit to make a decision. If she or he fails to make a decision, then the stakeholder's file must be deemed automatically approved. At the same time, India needs fast-track, independent tribunals to speedily resolve stakeholder complaints. The "pocket veto" of bureaucrats in which they stymie economic activity by taking no action has to go. The state cannot penalize its citizens while its bureaucrats behave with impunity.

Fourth, Indian bureaucrats must no longer have the power to throttle supply-side activity. The default principle of the British-designed still-colonial state is that activities not explicitly permitted are often automatically deemed illegal. In much of the world, if an activity is not expressly forbidden by the law, the citizen has the freedom to engage in it. In India, an activity not expressly permitted by law or regulation can be shut down anytime. The fact it might be of much economic or social value, provide employment or essential services for a community is irrelevant. Fines, long-drawn inquiries and even closure are real consequences if even a petty bureaucrat takes umbrage.

It is important to note that the British did not design such an oppressive bureaucracy for themselves. There is no British Administrative Service in the UK. The MI6, Scotland Yard, the British Treasury and the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office recruit horses for courses who are accountable for their performance. In contrast, Indian bureaucrats behave as rulers, not as public servants. In states such as Vietnam or Thailand that are not democracies like India, the default setting is different and labor, tax or environment regulators are not as powerful. This allows for greater entrepreneurial and economic activity.

Indian bureaucrats constantly argue that changing the default setting is a prelude to chaos. They need onerous laws to avoid a humongous country like India from descending into disorder.

The reality is that small businesses are increasingly crushed by compliance requirements of innumerable regulations. If a trader fails to clarify, say, subclause three of clause 30 on the 10th page, then she or he can spend eternity running from pillar to post. The government has to simplify forms and stop interfering in economic activity if it wants income, jobs and growth to increase.

Victorian Moralizing Costs Too Much

Finally, India must discard its Victorian attitudes toward "sin" industries and rationalize its policies toward them. The country faces a massive economic crisis. In particular, state governments may run out of cash. Many of them derive a significant percentage of their revenues from taxing liquor or tobacco and running lotteries. Yet both central and state follow moralizing, inconsistent and incoherent policies for these "sin" industries that do not make any sense at all.

While known carcinogens like khaini — the Indian version of fermented, dried tobacco — can be sold freely, too many relatively innocuous activities are either illegal or under restrictive regulations. One of the authors experienced the folly of prohibition as a young officer in Nagaland. Even pastors preaching temperance drank clandestinely as did police officers seizing liquor, making bootlegging the biggest industry in this American Baptist state. This caused a massive loss of revenue to Nagaland while fostering a culture of all-pervasive corruption. Other states have similarly impractical holier-than-thou policies.

Similarly, many Indian states take a strong stance against so-called sinful activities such as betting and live entertainment. As a result, these activities are pushed into the black economy. This benefits criminal rackets and deprives states of revenues, increasing the tax burden on more socially desirable activities. Puritanism in India has perverse consequences. A more mature approach that formalizes and taxes "sin" industries instead of driving them underground will boost the Indian economy immensely. India

can take inspiration from its past. The Khajuraho Temples still draw in tourists and continue to benefit the local economy centuries after their construction.

It is an open secret that Indians flock to casinos in Singapore and Macau. India could allow casinos in coastal areas or islands to keep precious capital home and boost tax revenues. Goa already allows for gambling in circuitous ways. A rational policy toward gambling and betting is long overdue.

Question 1: Can These Policies Work?

For all its faults, India is a large economy and has established some domestic market institutions. Unlike the 1950s or even the 1960s, the country is not facing the same existential questions. At that time, India suffered from food insecurity, lacked capital and had a lingering suspicion of corporations, which was only natural given its colonization by the British East India Company.

These policies are not advocating autarky like the Nehruvian model. They are not advocating East Asian-style export-led growth. That ship has sailed. The World Trade Organization (WTO) estimates that trade could fall by as much as 32% in 2020 thanks to COVID-19. Therefore, domestic industrialization through domestic players, foreign capital and foreign direct investment is the way forward.

Question 2: Will They Work?

In the pre-pandemic world, India could not compete with Japan, South Korea, China and other Asian economies. These countries had mastered the manufacturing game with scale, technology and supply chain linkages in their favor. Furthermore, the WTO rules did not allow India to support domestic industry. The free trade agreements India signed over the years also opened up markets to foreign players, decimating domestic rivals.

COVID-19 has fundamentally changed the rules of the game. Trump had already initiated a trade war against China. Now, other countries are

turning away from the haloed principles of free trade, which was never truly free in the first place. Trade deals have always been a product of torturous negotiations, and Indian bureaucrats with little domain expertise or legal training have negotiated poor deals for the country. Feckless political leadership did not help either.

The post-pandemic world will give India a historic opportunity to reset the clock. Already, it has walked out of negotiations for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a trade bloc largely of East and Southeast Asian nations. Now, the RCEP wants India back at the table. This demonstrates that companies in these nations want access to Indian markets. Instead of signing yet another FTA, India must play hardball and welcome these companies to manufacture their wares within Indian shores. If it does so, there is no reason why this domestic industrialization will not work.

Question 3: Are They Worth Undertaking?

With a broken financial sector, comatose private sector and clueless governance of the economy, India could experience mass suffering and political turmoil. The government has shown much political will on issues like Article 370 in Kashmir that have plagued the nation since 1947. It is time for it to show similar will in the economic realm and implement long-overdue structural reforms that include changing the toxic nature of its colonial state.

The services sector is at a saturation point. Agriculture remains stagnant and industry has been hit hard. India desperately needs a new growth engine. If India boosts domestic manufacturing, reforms its underperforming public sector, gives stakeholders the right to redress their grievances against the state, takes away supply-side constraints and rationalizes policy on “sin industries,” it could enter a multi-decade growth spurt as in 1991. Then, as now, India could put a crisis to good use and improve the living standards of millions. Surely, that is worth undertaking.

***Atul Singh** is the founder, CEO and editor-in-chief of Fair Observer. **Manu Sharma** is a political analyst with an international footprint.

Hate in the Time of Coronavirus

Kitty Shropshire

May 7, 2020

There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that incidents relating to the fear of foreigners are on the rise.

There is no part of the globe that has not been affected by the novel coronavirus pandemic. At the time of writing, over 200 countries and territories have reported outbreaks as the global number of confined COVID-19 cases continues its steady march towards 4 million. But there is another pandemic that is threatening the health of our global community, one that is less novel but has its own deadly consequences — xenophobia.

While public health organizations across the globe are diligently collecting and reporting data on the growing number of COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations and fatalities, there is no centralized mechanism for collecting evidence of the global increase in xenophobic harassment, discrimination and violence. But patchwork reporting from NGOs, activist groups and the news media over the past two months demonstrates a wealth of evidence to suggest that incidents relating to the fear of foreigners are on the rise — and that no country is immune.

Doubling Down

Ultrnationalist leaders and other ideologues who have long relied on xenophobic rhetoric to secure their own power have doubled down of the canard of foreigners as vectors of disease. In the United States, President Donald Trump has repeatedly defended his own use of monikers such as the “Chinese virus” and the “Wuhan flu,” as well as the use of the “Kung-Flu” by members

of his administration to refer to the origin of the coronavirus. In India, Dilip Ghosh, president of the West Bengal unit of the Bharatiya Janata Party, claimed that the coronavirus was God’s revenge on China for “destroying nature.”

In Brazil, Education Minister Abraham Weintraub suggested that COVID-19 was a part of China’s plans for “world domination” and mocked the way people from China pronounce his country’s name. In Kenya, a Facebook post went viral in which a member of parliament wrote that if the Kenyan government did not forcefully quarantine Chinese nationals, he gave constituents “his permission to chase away and stone any Chinese people within their vicinity.”

The effects of this rhetoric can be seen in the ways that people of Chinese descent have been publicly harassed and discriminated against in recent weeks. In mid-March, the Los Angeles-based Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council launched an initiative called STOP AAPI HATE, to track bias incidents against the Asian American and Pacific Islander community in the United States. In its first two weeks of data collection, STOP AAPI HATE received over 1,100 reports that included verbal harassment, workplace discrimination and denial of public accommodation.

In Thailand, police instructed a restaurant owner in Chiang Mai to remove a sign that denied service to Chinese people, but suggested instead that they replace it with one written in Chinese that read “We ran out of food.” In Northern Italy, Chinese-owned businesses were vandalized by supporters of the far-right Forza Nuova party, who plastered posters that read “Coronavirus? Buy Italian. It’s a moral duty” on the storefronts.

Excited Into Violence

But the harmful effects of xenophobic rhetoric are not limited to acts of discrimination and intimidation or targeted at one narrowly specified national identity. The fear and prejudice stoked by xenophobia is too promiscuous, and too easily excited into violence. In Israel, an Indian

immigrant and member of Israel's Bnei Menashe community was hospitalized after being beaten by two men who believed him to be Chinese. In London, a Singaporean student at University College London was left with broken facial bones after being assaulted in the street by a group of teenagers.

In Texas, a man was arrested for attempted murder after stabbing three members of a Burmese family — as well as a store employee who attempted to intervene — inside a big box retailer. In China, the mistreatment of African nationals living in the “Little Africa” neighborhood of Guangzhou sparked diplomatic tensions between China and the African Union and prompted the US Consulate General to issue a travel advisory that warned African Americans to avoid the city.

New waves of xenophobic sentiment such as the ones currently being stoked by the COVID-19 pandemic can exacerbate existing tensions or be exploited by racist and ultranationalist groups hoping to further their goals during a time of crisis. In Kazakhstan, 10 people were killed and another 178 injured during anti-Dungan riots that pushed thousands of the ethnic Chinese minority over the border and into Kyrgyzstan.

In Iran, state-funded media has seeded conspiracy theories claiming the novel coronavirus is a bioweapon engineered by Israel and the United States. Similar conspiracies have been promoted by white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups, who have also been reported to be discussing ways to weaponize the virus and use violence to further disrupt the already overburdened health-care systems.

Unfortunately, the incidents listed here account for only a small fraction of the xenophobic acts of harassment, discrimination and violence that have taken place since SARS-CoV-2 was first identified at the end of last year. There are undoubtedly more to come. But as the world continues to coordinate its response to the pandemic, it is vital that political leaders, policymakers and ordinary citizens remember that the virus itself knows no nationality and

acknowledges no borders. It is a threat to us all, and we must all fight it together.

***Kitty Shropshire** is a PhD candidate in literary and cultural studies.

Iraq Faces Insecurity Alone

Antonino Occhiuto

May 7, 2020

Baghdad will have to confront formidable security challenges inside Iraq on its own.

In late March, the US-led coalition, operating under the auspices of Operation Inherent Resolve, announced that it was relocating most of its personnel and equipment out of Iraq. By early April, the coalition already completed the transfer of four major bases hosting US-led troops back to Iraqi security forces.

This represents the most significant US drawdown since January when the Iraqi parliament called for the expulsion of all foreign troops from the country. It also confirms that Baghdad will have to confront formidable security challenges, such as the Islamic State (IS) group's resurrection attempts and US-Iran confrontation inside Iraq, increasingly on its own. Iraq's new prime minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who appears to have secured the country's top job, will face the aforementioned challenges in a context characterized by the spread of the coronavirus and the economic blow to state revenue from low oil prices.

Daesh Strikes Back

Despite losing control over large swaths of territory in both Iraq and Syria and the killing of most of its foreign fighters, IS continues to rely on — for its ongoing covert operations — a considerable number of Iraqi affiliates. Anbari tribesmen and Baathist loyalists have constituted the bulk of its force throughout the Islamic State's existence. It is, therefore, no surprise that

Iraq is the country that continues to suffer the most from the group's activities.

Most recently, the terrorist organization has been preparing to take advantage of Iraq's preoccupation with the coronavirus pandemic and the US-led coalition's suspension of its military operations. The withdrawal of coalition forces could further facilitate the Islamic State's plans. The Qayyarah West airfield in northern Iraq and the al-Taqaddum Air Base in the country's al-Anbar province — which were both handed over by Washington to Iraqi forces — played a crucial role in the coalition's efforts to provide air cover and logistical and technological support to Baghdad's forces in the fight against IS.

In recent months, IS militants have already increased the number of attacks in the region extending between the provinces of Kirkuk, Saladin and Diyala. By targeting this specific region, IS hopes to exploit and infiltrate void areas between the places controlled by Baghdad and those controlled by Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government. Even more worryingly, the Islamic State is attempting to re-extort payments from local residents to provide its fighters with financial compensation.

In this context, the Hamrin Mountains in Diyala province and desert areas in al-Anbar — territories that are difficult to access and control — continue to provide shelter to IS militants. The withdrawal of the coalition's technological surveillance assets is likely to consolidate the group's ability to engage in hit-and-run tactics using remote areas as safe havens.

On April 13, in response to the Islamic State's increasing offensives, Iraq's security forces launched a military operation against the terror group in Kirkuk province. This is Baghdad's first major test on the ground since the coalition reduced its anti-IS efforts. Crucially, the battle experience gained by Iraq's army and the Shia Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) during their 2015-17 pushback against IS and their superior conventional forces are sufficient to prevent the re-establishment of a territorial caliphate inside Iraq. However, Baghdad's ongoing security

crackdown against IS will inevitably suffer from the absence of the US-led coalition's technology and from the end of those training programs that have been key to prepare local forces to counter the organization's guerrilla tactics.

The US-Iran Standoff

The other major security threat faced by Iraq in the coming months is the risk that the military confrontation between the US on one side and Iran and its local proxies on the other escalates inside Iraq. As recently as May 6, Katyusha-type rockets targeted a military complex used by US troops near Baghdad International Airport. In March, the US Air Force struck five weapons storage facilities belonging to Kataib Hezbollah (KH), an Iranian proxy militia incorporated into Iraq's security forces as part of the PMU framework. This followed KH-perpetrated rocket attacks on the Taji military base — north of Baghdad — which killed three members of the US-led coalition.

The US assassination of the top Iranian general, Qasem Soleimani, and Kataib Hezbollah's commander, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, in January exponentially increased Baghdad's fears that its territory could be used as a battleground for a larger US-Iran military confrontation. The March incidents and the passing of the deadline issued by KH for all US forces to leave Iraq confirm that such fears are justified, especially if Iran continues to use its proxies as pressure for a complete US withdrawal and Washington continues to rely on military force to curb Tehran's influence in Iraq.

The nature and priorities of the PMU represent a security issue in itself for Baghdad as Iraq's government continues its struggle to establish full control over important PMU militias whose senior leaders maintain close links with Iran's leadership. The country's new prime minister, Kadhimi, seems the ideal candidate to ease Tehran-Washington tensions.

As chief of Iraq's national intelligence, Kadhimi was able to develop a strong professional relationship with the intelligence

communities in both the United States and Iran. In addition, following the resignation of former Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi — considered as closer to Tehran — and the failure of the more Washington-friendly candidate, Adnan al-Zurfi, to form a government, both the US and Iran are more likely to accept a compromise candidate such as Kadhimi.

Considering the two major security challenges Baghdad faces following the beginning of the US-led coalition withdrawal out of Iraq, the Islamic State’s resurrection is likely to be the most challenging in the short term. The terror group has already been able to increase its activities as a result of the coalition’s reduced counterinsurgency efforts, and the prospect of a further withdrawal of US-led forces is a boost to the morale of local IS affiliates.

While in the short term both the US and Iran appear to be willing to give Kadhimi a chance as a compromise candidate, both countries will continue to seek to limit each other’s influence in Baghdad. Moreover, in the medium to long term, even a more significant relocation of US military forces out of Iraq does not exclude another US-Iran military escalation inside Iraq.

***Antonino Occhiuto** is an analyst and researcher at Gulf State Analytics.

No, 5G Didn’t Cause the Coronavirus Pandemic

Beau Peters
May 11, 2020

The 5G conspiracy theory not only serves to pull focus from truly useful information but actively damages our efforts to fight this pandemic.

What a strange, twisted time we’re all experiencing at the moment. It would be bad enough if all we had to contend

with was a novel virus, a lockdown and a projected 12 to 18-month wait for a vaccine. Unfortunately, there are those among us who are indulging in the spread of misinformation.

President Donald Trump himself touted hydroxychloroquine as a potential miracle cure and a queried whether disinfectant could be injected into COVID-19 patients as a “cleaning.” The general public has its own baseless conspiracy theories that range from the novel coronavirus being created in a laboratory for weaponization to it being a method of population control. However, one of the most enduring and insidious ideas is that the pandemic was caused and spread by the introduction of 5G networks.

This conspiracy theory revolves around the widespread rollout of the 5th generation of cellular networks worldwide. It’s not a light undertaking, either: As this resource illustrates, wireless technology manufacturers in the US are planning to invest upwards of \$275 billion to take advantage of the advanced connectivity it will offer and could result in up to \$500 billion in economic growth.

Spread by Radio Waves

However, some have used the coincidental timing of this rollout to place unfounded blame for the current pandemic. It began in January, when a Belgian doctor erroneously linked the technology to the virus. Since then, the rumor has spread that the virus can either be transmitted through radio waves or that the radiation from 5G cell towers suppresses our immune response. Celebrities like Woody Harrelson and John Cusack have served to perpetuate the idea among an already scared public.

This idea of COVID-19 being spread by radio waves or that 5G causes radiation immunosuppression has no factual basis. The truth, as confirmed by the World Health Organization (WHO), is that the coronavirus cannot travel on radio waves or mobile networks, and that the energy waves in the form of nonionizing radiation from 5G cell towers are so small that they aren’t strong enough to affect the

immune system. To suggest that 5G is responsible for our current pandemic is not only false but actively dangerous.

In any pandemic scenario, the key to an effective response is clear messaging. People need to understand what the threat is, and what the medically mandated instructions are. By offering up 5G as a cause of infection among other baseless concepts, the clarity of useful messaging is being muddled. Focus gets pulled from the genuine steps the public can take to stay safe.

There are also more direct consequences. Particularly in the UK, 5G engineers have experienced everything from accusations that their work was directly killing people to verbal and physical abuse. Arsonists have also targeted 5G cellular towers, including one that was providing vital services to the newly opened NHS Nightingale hospital in Birmingham — a facility expressly intended to treat COVID-19 patients — cutting off families from final goodbyes.

Perpetuating rumors about 5G's links to the coronavirus is hazardous to the public's ability to protect itself with reliable information, infrastructure workers' ability to operate safely and can have a detrimental effect upon emergency services that are already struggling to cope. What, then, can be done to halt this misinformation?

One way to combat misinformation is with a commitment to disseminate factual information. The 5G conspiracy has had some presence in mainstream media, but the greatest tool for its spread has been social media. Each of us can take steps to improve the information people are receiving and sharing.

First of all, we need to help people understand the nature of 5G. The last few decades have seen our cellular services evolve from the analog systems of 1G to the digital 3G and 4G networks that helped make wireless internet practical. As noted, 5G is expected to offer 10 times the bandwidth of our current networks. However, rather than being a potential threat, it is expected

to be no more harmful than other sources of electromagnetic radiation, such as visible light.

Staying calm and reasonable is important. We get it, this kind of false messaging is frustrating, but you won't achieve much through anger. When posting information, present a calm and clear outlook. Don't apportion blame or use intellectual snobbery. Anxiety in a pandemic is only natural, and taking anything other than reasonable actions may trigger negative responses.

Utilizing social media with a visual approach can be a useful way to provide succinct information. Think infographics, artwork, videos. However, always make certain that you are only spreading advice from credible sources, such as the WHO and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

At a time where we feel like we have no control, some of us go looking for someone or something to blame, a scapegoat as a focus for our ire. The 5G conspiracy theory not only serves to pull focus from truly useful information, but actively damages our efforts to fight this pandemic. We each have a responsibility to do our due diligence to ensure we're receiving credible information and to quell the spread of misinformation by calmly and reasonably presenting the facts.

***Beau Peters** is a creative professional with a lifetime of experience in service and care.

Missing Bangladeshi Journalist Has Been “Found” — Now He Must Be Freed

Alannah Travers

May 12, 2020

The manner of Kajol's disappearance and the illogical charges that have been brought against him raise serious human rights concerns.

Last week, 53 days after his suspicious disappearance on March 10, Bangladeshi journalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol was “found” by authorities in Benapole, 150 miles from Dhaka where he was last seen. On May 3, border guards apparently discovered Kajol, the editor of the daily newspaper Dainik Pokkhokal, in a field near the Bangladesh-India border, blindfolded and with his legs and arms bound.

While it is a relief to learn that Kajol is alive, his discovery is by no means the end of his ordeal. In the immediate days that followed, the photojournalist faced five charges against him: three under the country’s infamous Digital Security Act and two further cases brought after his discovery.

Instead of ensuring his wellbeing and swift release, Kajol was accused of attempting to illegally cross the border into Bangladesh, arrested and detained on charges of trespassing and entering the country without legal documentation. His 20-year-old son, Monorom Polok, received a phone call from an officer at Benapole police station informing him of his father’s situation. Polok immediately made the six-hour journey from the family home in Dhaka to see his father and attend his hearing in Jessore.

Although trespassing is a bailable offense in Bangladesh, and the court ordered that Kajol be granted bail, the authorities have refused to release him. Later that day, Polok learned that police filed a further case against him under the widely criticized Section 54 of the Criminal Procedure Code — a law used to detain anyone under suspicion, without requiring evidence or proof — in order to justify his extended captivity. But this charge was brought after the bail hearing, meaning that Kajol should have been released.

The Charges

The day before his disappearance, Kajol was one of 32 individuals subjected to a criminal defamation complaint by an Awami League MP, Saifuzzaman Shikhor, facing accusations of publishing defamatory news in the form of a

Facebook post about the alleged involvement of Shikhor and other figures with a female escort service. Under the country’s repressive Digital Security Act, Kajol faces up to seven years in prison. His disappearance, and suspected torture, appear to be heavily connected.

Over 500 people have been victims of suspicious disappearances in Bangladesh over the last decade, many of them journalists. The Reporters Without Borders’ (RSF) 2020 World Press Freedom Index ranks Bangladesh 151 out of 180 countries, attributing its poor position to the tougher methods adopted by Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the ruling Awami League party.

RSF explicitly criticizes the 2018 Digital Security Act — under which Kajol has been charged — calling it a “custom-made judicial weapon for silencing journalists.” Amnesty International has stressed how the act violates the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, a treaty to which Bangladesh is a party.

Although much remains unknown about what Kajol experienced during the several weeks he was unaccounted for and what sentence he may receive, one thing is clear: his life is at risk. The World Health Organization has measured Bangladesh’s closed-case death rate from the COVID-19 disease at over four times that of India and 10 times higher than Sri Lanka. Due to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus in Bangladesh, the courts are currently closed, and it appears likely that his trial will be put on hold until the threat of the pandemic passes.

Kajol’s Family

According to Polok, “The issue that is taking our sleep away at the moment is his health.” While the prisoner capacity in Bangladesh is 41,000, the current number of prisoners is 90,000 — more than double. Kajol’s family is gravely concerned about the increased risk he faces of contracting COVID-19 in Bangladesh’s overcrowded prisons, particularly as an older, vulnerable inmate.

The day after Kajol was discovered, 874 police officers tested positive for the disease, and guards and prisoners face a greater risk of catching and transmitting the virus. In court, police officers wore protective clothing and face masks while Kajol had no protection.

In Bangladesh, many prisoners — including those sentenced for the most serious crimes of murder and rape — have been allowed to leave confinement for their health and safety. Sheikh Hasina has urged Bangladeshis to show humanity and stay at home in order to contain the pandemic. With prisoners around the world being released or permitted to serve their sentence at home to protect them from the spread of the virus, Kajol’s family desperately hopes he will receive similar treatment.

Polok continues: “My mother has stopped eating and sleeping. Her salary has stopped because of COVID-19. We do not know how to run our family and fight this legal battle.”

Since his father disappeared, Polok has run a relentless campaign to draw interest to the case. He even held an online photography exhibition, “Last Man Standing,” of his father’s work last month that has been viewed by over 200,000 people, at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has meant physical protests are impossible. Maintaining public attention on the case matters, and many believe it led to Kajol being “found.” It is exhausting and thankless, but Polok pledges to continue fighting until his father is free, telling us: “I’m not doing any of this for my benefit; I’m doing this as my duty to my father.”

Ultimately, the brutal manner of Kajol’s disappearance, the multiple and illogical charges that have been brought against him, and the apparent political nature of these attacks on his freedom of expression raise serious human rights concerns.

International human rights laws require governments to protect the right to freedom of expression. As long as Kajol remains in custody, and with the closure of courts restricting his ability to challenge his detention, we will

continue to call on the Bangladeshi authorities to release him.

***Alannah Travers** is the vice-chair of the Labour Campaign for Human Rights.

The Colorful World of Coronavirus Conspiracies

Hans-Georg Betz

May 13, 2020

The COVID-19 crisis has spawned myriads of fake news and conspiracy theories bringing together those seeking an emotional outlet for their impotent rage.

A few days ago, thousands of demonstrators gathered in a number of German cities, ignoring government restrictions and guidelines regarding social distancing or the wearing of protective face masks. Among the demonstrators were many ordinary citizens, but also extremists from both sides of the political spectrum, conspiracy theorists, and members of the radical right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD). In recent years, demonstrations like these were typically directed against the “Islamization of the West.” With the closing of the borders and the general lockdown, the question of Islam has lost its mobilizing force.

Fortunately enough, Germany’s notorious Wutbürger — irate citizens — have found a new cause that allows them to blow off steam: the restrictions imposed by Angela Merkel’s government to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. Although restrictions have been loosened, the demonstrators think that not enough has been done. They want a return to “normal,” to life as it was just a few months ago. The protests are fed by the kind of nostalgia typical of radical right-wing populist rhetoric throughout Western Europe. Not surprisingly, the AfD has latched on to the issue, as has the Austrian Freedom Party

(FPÖ). Both parties have been on the decline, if for different reasons. Both appear to believe that the “resistance” against the COVID-19 restrictive measures will boost their political fortunes.

The protests are informed by a simple idea, hatched from one of the many conspiracy theories that circulate these days — the notion that the COVID-19 restrictions are part of a sinister plan aimed at robbing citizens of their individual liberties. One of the leading “minds” behind the notion is a hitherto relatively unknown former radio moderator who in 2011 was forced to resign from a Berlin radio station after he had characterized the holocaust as a PR stunt. A few weeks ago, he posted a video on YouTube, which quickly went viral.

Conspiracy theories usually center upon a villain. Some might remember Lyndon LaRouche, who famously claimed that the queen of England controlled the international drug trade. In the COVID-19 video, the author enlightens his audience that the novel coronavirus is part of a conspiracy aimed at drastically reducing humanity via mass vaccinations laced with sterilization molecules. The villains — Bill and Melinda Gates, organizers heading a vast web of collaborators, from the World Health Organization to the national governments to doctors and nurses. This might sound quite ludicrous, yet so far this theory has found an audience of over 3 million visitors and appears to have motivated some of the recent protests against the restrictions on individual liberty.

The Issue of Liberty

Adopting the issue of liberty has allowed the radical populist right in Germany and Austria to promote themselves as defenders and advocates of constitutional rights and the Rechtsstaat. The FPÖ has been quick to advocate a swift “return to normal normalcy.” At the same time it has accused the government of “celebrating the state of emergency” while thousands of Austrian citizens were being plunged into a permanent “dependency on the black-green bureaucracy” (Austria has a center-right Green coalition

government) and of intentionally scaring the citizens in order to be able to interfere with basic rights and liberties.

German commentators were quick to dismiss the protesters as “Coronadeppen” (corona idiots), likely to be responsible for new infections. Polls suggest, however, that behind the madness are genuine concerns. In a German poll from early April, more than 40% of respondents indicated they were quite concerned that their liberties would be restricted over an extended period of time; two weeks later, 20% of respondents thought that lockdown restrictions were exaggerated.

One of the more curious cases of coronavirus-inspired conspiracy theories is the recent open letter, published as an “appeal” and signed by ultra-conservative Catholic dignitaries and laypersons. The authors charge that “there are powers interested in creating panic among the world’s population with the sole aim of permanently imposing unacceptable forms of restriction on freedoms, of controlling people and of tracking their movements. The imposition of these illiberal measures is a disturbing prelude to the realization of a world government beyond all control.” The goal? To erase “centuries of Christian civilization” and establish “an odious technological tyranny” where “nameless and faceless people can decide the fate of the world by confining us to a virtual reality.”

The appeal originated overseas, with significant support from Italian ultra-Catholic circles. Any connections to Donald Trump’s increasingly desperate attempts to save the rubble of the American dream — and his presidency — is purely coincidental.

Trump, of course, has turned conspiracy narratives into a central discursive instrument of his struggle for political survival. It all started with the charge that COVID-19 was nothing but a hoax fabricated by his political enemies to undermine and discredit his presidency. Now, it has reached its preliminary end with the charge that the virus was intentionally created and released by a lab in China. For Trump, the

“China connection” has served primarily to distract his faithful and committed followers from his abysmal record and absolve him of his indirect responsibility for the deaths of thousands of Americans.

“Chinese Virus”

Europeans, however, should not gloat. Their governments were, on the whole, just as callous and unprepared as their counterpart in the United States. It is, therefore, not all that surprising that the “Chinese virus” trope has gained increasing traction in Europe.

This is quite surprising given the fact that for some time after the outbreak in Europe, China was largely seen as the big winner of the pandemic. Unlike the United States, which had nothing to give, China was generous in providing a range of medical equipment to the worst-hit countries in Europe, from Serbia to Italy to Spain. Once its “mask diplomacy” turned nasty, however, seeking to cajole European leaders to praise the Chinese government’s stellar performance in dealing with the pandemic and its generosity while simultaneously chastising European governments for their lack of preparedness, the public mood soured.

Suddenly, the “Chinese virus” trope started to resonate with the public. In late April, for instance, almost half of Italian respondents in a representative poll believed that the virus had originated in a lab, with a sizeable minority thinking it was released intentionally.

Similar results have been found in Spain. At the end of April, a representative poll found almost half of respondents agreeing with the statement that the origin of the virus was intentional. The Spanish radical populist right Vox party was quick to exploit the issue. A leading party spokesman, for instance, citing American right-wing news sources like The Washington Times and Fox News, claimed on Twitter that the virus had originated in a secret lab in Wuhan where it had been designed to level the global economic playing field and allow China to compete with the United States.

The COVID-19 crisis has spawned myriads of fake news and conspiracy theories bringing together a motley crew of eccentrics, extremists from both sides of the aisle, the gullible and ignorant, and, last but not least, ordinary citizens seeking an emotional outlet for their impotent rage: anti-vaxxers convinced that COVID-19 is nothing more than an attempt to force them to get vaccinated; racists for whom it is just one more Jewish conspiracy to dominate the world; technophobes who believe that 5G antennas activate and propagate the virus.

Strangely enough, to the best of my knowledge, nobody has so far blamed Jeff Bezos for the pandemic. Yet Amazon not only sends millions of packages across the world, it has also been one of the biggest winners of this pandemic — the ideal constellation for a good conspiracy. Any takers?

***Hans-Georg Betz** is an adjunct professor of political science at the University of Zurich.

Central Europe Tiptoes Into the New World After Coronavirus

Sona Muzikarova

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What’s in store for Central European economies beyond managing the pandemic, and when/how will their economies bounce back?

Classic textbooks teach us that economic shocks typically hit either the demand or the supply sides of the economy. They usually stem from domestic developments, but sometimes they emerge from abroad. COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, has defied this logic and has done so in new ways. For example, one of its distinctive features — one that has been particularly excruciating for policymakers — has been the tradeoff between

containing the global pandemic and the ensuing economic crisis.

Since the start of the outbreak in late 2019, evidence has mounted that early implementation of containment measures leads to better outcomes. It appears that countries that introduced strict containment measures after only a handful of confirmed cases of COVID-19 were discovered — or even shortly after the first death was recorded — tended to fare better in containing the spread of the virus and preventing it from getting out of hand.

In Western Europe, Portugal is a case in point. In Central Europe, Slovakia has championed the crisis response with the lowest number of deaths per capita on the continent. Lagging behind its Western European peers on several other counts, Central European countries have been surprisingly apt at managing the COVID-19 crisis.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the region's governments have been under pressure to start gradually lifting their lockdowns to contain the coronavirus. The Slovak government, for example, has introduced a four-phased reopening strategy that is dependent on the situation continuing to improve. The policy, which is reassessed every two weeks, looks at the seven-day average in the number of people being hospitalized with COVID-19. In the first phase, which commenced on April 22, shops and places with an area of up to 300-square meters were allowed to resume operations. Poland went ahead with a similar step on April 20 and Austria dared to do so even earlier on April 14.

Buying Time

The world has taken notice of how well Central Europe has handled the pandemic. Yet the region has recently been called out for its overly strict containment measures, given that Central Europe's robust containment position — with few confirmed infections each day and one of the lowest death tolls on the continent — came at a sizeable economic cost.

Such debates are important, especially if scaled by data-backed interdisciplinary considerations. The process of economic resurgence should be data-driven and science should play a key role in how governments form recovery strategies. The gradual nature of lifting lockdowns means that we are still buying time to learn more about the coronavirus.

A recent empirical study about COVID-19 and immunity puts it succinctly when it says the “reliance on comprehensive ... [data and conducting solid research into protection] ... will allow policy to be guided by secure, evidence-based assumptions on herd immunity, rather than optimistic guesses.”

An agnostic reopening approach also seems warranted as epidemiologists warn of a possibility of a second wave of the outbreak. International research institutions, including the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), have advocated for testing as a way not only to lift containment measures, but also to fight any second bout of COVID-19. Specifically, the study estimates that between 70% to 90% of people that an infected person meets will need to be traced, tested and isolated, which the OECD sees as our best bet in the absence of a vaccine.

This is especially important for Central Europe, where the testing rate per 1,000 population is low, hovering at about 5% for Slovakia and below 4% for Poland and Hungary in recent months. The capacities for far-reaching and extensive testing, tracing and isolating must be stepped up. The associated challenges and economic costs are dim compared to the consequences of another coronavirus lockdown.

The Economic Toll

On April 30, the European Statistical Office published its flash GDP estimate for the eurozone and the European Union for the first three months of the year. At -3.8% on quarter, the eurozone seems to have posted its worst contraction on record. The EU economy seems to have performed marginally better at -3.5% on quarter,

padding by the presence of countries (including many in Central Europe) where the coronavirus outbreak was milder.

Still, this is just a warmup for Q2, when a double-digit quarterly contraction will not be far-fetched for the period of three months between April and June, the point that COVID-19 sent the European economy into an ice age. For macro analysts and the like who are used to looking at national accounts data, the numbers will be beyond surreal, but a painful coronavirus bill was expected. Now, the real question is: How fast can these economies return to normalcy beyond Q2, if at all?

As a bottom line, for as long as a vaccine is out of reach, consumption and investment activities are set to stay quiet in the quarters to come. After having experienced such a heavy hit to confidence, consumers, companies and investors will likely remain vigilant for some time. Different economic reopening models may continue weighing down trade activity and the smooth running of value chains, which are important features of the regional economy.

There is also the risk of a second peak of the coronavirus, something the eurozone needs to gear up for now. In sum, it will take Herculean efforts, a little faith and some time to jumpstart the economic recovery.

Sensible and data-driven reemergence strategies are important, but so is the medium-term playbook. The successful management of the pandemic in Central Europe to date has been a silver lining of a severe health crisis. And we will, hopefully, have more reasons for optimism as governments and stakeholders take COVID-19 as a catalyst to take up digitalization, complete integration of financial and capital markets, take a leap toward green growth and introduce the much-needed dormant reform efforts, which have the potential to upgrade the region to a higher order of recovery mode.

***Sona Muzikarova** is a chief economist at GLOBSEC.