

Mask dynamics between the Korean government and civil society in the COVID-19 era

Jae-Hyung Kim



Above: Sign attached to the front window of a pharmacy in Daejeon stating that all 'public masks' have been sold out for the day. Photo by Rickinasia. Courtesy wikimedia under a CC license.

More than seven months have passed since the World Health Organization first reported a novel coronavirus disease. On 5 August 2020, the accumulated number of confirmed cases in South Korea was 14,456 and the accumulated death toll 302. South Korea has been one of the most successful countries in controlling the outbreak, employing aggressive measures such as quick and large-scale testing whilst maintaining daily routines. The Western press has started to examine the reasons behind this success, with some crediting the Confucian collectivist culture as a fundamental ethical motivation. They have further argued that Koreans tend to be submissive to authority, willing to follow the government's strict measures without question. This article presents an insider's perspective of South Korea's successful response to the virus, focusing on the dynamics and debates surrounding face masks, in order to demonstrate how the interaction between the Korean government and civil society has played an important role in these critical times.

With the first case of COVID-19 confirmed on 20 January, the issues of most concern included the existence of asymptomatic cases and the fact that COVID-19's early symptoms were indiscernible from those of the common cold. Such uncertainty provoked anxiety and fear. There was also rage directed towards the Chinese government for their reticence in sharing information, which was seen to have contributed to the spreading of COVID-19. The fear that infected Chinese people would spread the disease within South Korea led many Koreans to demand a government ban on Chinese nationals from entering the country. Foreign workers, Korean Chinese, and Koreans returning from China also became subject to hatred borne out of fear. In such an atmosphere of uncertainty, anxiety, and hatred, face masks soon became an important commodity in Korean society as citizens regarded masks to be the only weapon of defense against COVID-19.

While most countries conducted lockdowns or strict social distancing measures in order to stop COVID-19 from spreading, the Korean government enforced relatively weaker policies. Many experts have cited thorough tracking, wide-range testing, and aggressive treatment as the reasons for South Korea's successful COVID-19 control amidst such

relaxed social distancing policies, yet it would be impossible to discuss Korea's response to COVID-19 without addressing the important role that masks have played. In the early stages of the pandemic, when the efficacy of the state's policy had yet to be proven, and with the hindsight of past experiences, the social consensus that emerged was for everyone to wear a face mask. A face mask used to be rarely seen in Korea, but after the 2009 Swine Flu epidemic and the 2018 MERS epidemic, mask wearing became common practice. In addition to the gradual increase of novel infectious diseases, the problem of air pollution resulting from fine dust particles led people to rely on masks as protective gear and to incorporate them into daily routine. On days with high pollution levels, more and more people began to wear masks when going outside. The South Koreans' familiarity with wearing masks, meant they naturally and easily employed this strategy to tackle the new risk of COVID-19.

In the very beginning, expert groups, including the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, did in fact not encourage mask wearing. This was because information on the novel disease was still scarce and evidence that mask wearing could prevent it was lacking. Arguments originating from the WHO and the US CDC, that masks do not help contain the virus and can even pose a bigger threat, were also espoused by some experts in Korea. From the end of February, however, the assertion that face masks could be an effective means of protecting the public from infected individuals by blocking the spread of droplets and aerosols began to persuade many. In a situation where carriers of the virus could not always be identified, encouraging everyone to wear a mask emerged as an efficient method to prevent the spread of the disease at a low cost.

Due to the fact that face masks could protect healthy members of the public from the infected, they came to be endowed with a new social meaning of being a 'public good' or 'common resource'. However, as mask wearing came to be established as an important norm in preventing COVID-19, the greater demand for KF80-KF94-KF99 face masks' by the public led to the risk of a supply shortage for medical professionals. This was not due to a supply shortage per se – factories were producing enough to go around – but rather due to the market logic of increasing profits at this critical time. Acts of buying in bulk and then reselling at a higher price meant that masks were not being fairly distributed.

The public's response was to demand that the government ensure a stable mask supply. This represented a fundamental shift in perceptions indeed since, for the government to acknowledge the need to intervene in the matter of mask supplies, the failure of the market also had to be acknowledged. Face masks, which had been personal commodities in the past, were now transformed into public goods; accordingly, the responsibility of ensuring their supply was handed to the government. In other words, the situation arising from COVID-19 led the citizens of South Korea to regard 'access to masks for self-protection' as a basic right of citizenship, and 'the provision of a stable supply of masks' as a duty that the government had to rightly serve. Criticism arose against the government when this duty was not properly fulfilled and mask supply became an important standard in evaluating state competence in controlling COVID-19. Even when the effectiveness of face masks had yet to be proven, the government accepted this demand made by its citizens and strove to supply masks through several measures, among which was the 'public mask' scheme – made possible with South Korea's public health system – which

ensured that all citizens could purchase two masks per week at selected pharmacies nationwide. As a result, most members of the public were able to gain steady access to face masks. This has been widely regarded as one of the reasons that South Korea was able to successfully keep COVID-19 under control.

Another issue arose, however, as the government came to replace the free market as the key supplier of masks. When the supply of masks had been left to the market, they had been expensive but could be bought by anyone; with their transformation into a common resource, individuals residing in South Korea but not documented by the public health system could no longer gain access to them. As a result, political debates emerged on the issue of Koreans and the 'Other' in the right to obtain masks, which expanded to a new discourse on inequality concerning citizenship in South Korean society. The National Migrant Human Rights Organization issued a statement on 7 March arguing that "hundreds of thousands of people are excluded, such as migrants who have stayed less than 6 months without health insurance, foreign students, migrant workers who work in un-licensed farming and fishing businesses, and unregistered foreigners". Also excluded from the 'public mask' scheme were refugees. This exclusion of foreigners was echoed in the Emergency Disaster Relief Fund provided to Korean citizens. Following aggressive criticism from civil society, the government expanded the eligibility for masks and the relief fund to foreigners, but some problems still remain.

Amidst the uncertainty caused by COVID-19, the South Korean government is building a better disease control system by reflecting upon past failures; civil society is also doing its part, striving for the well-being of both individuals and society. As the case of 'public masks' presented above has demonstrated, the dynamic interaction between the government and civil society – having little to do with Confucian culture – has been one of the key factors of success in dealing with COVID-19. The pandemic is ongoing and the future is unclear but South Korea's government and civil society, cooperating at times and contesting when needed, appear to be well equipped to acknowledge and handle problems such as economic downturn, discrimination at the margins of society, exclusion, and hatred that has accompanied the drawn-out crisis of COVID-19.

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Notes

- 1 KF80-KF94-KF99 face masks, produced in South Korea, respectively filter out 80%, 94%, and 99% of bioaerosols.

Negotiating the new normal in the COVID-19 era

Jongseok Yoon

On 12 August 2020, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases worldwide had increased to over 20 million, and the possibility of a second or third wave looms in the horizon. At present, it is difficult to estimate the long-term accumulative socioeconomic consequences of this novel virus, but one thing is clear: the pandemic has laid bare the weakest links of society that have heretofore been ignored or neglected.

Faced with an uncertain future, Seoul National University Asia Center (SNUAC) hosted an urgent roundtable under the



Above: Heated interest (with masks) at the 'Novel Coronavirus, Social Shock and Prospects' roundtable, 18 February 2020. Photo by SNUAC.

title 'Novel Coronavirus, Social Shock and Prospects' on 18 February 2020; collaborating with several research institutes and other institutions and with the participation of

Korean and overseas scholars, a further three academic conferences regarding COVID-19 have since been hosted. Comprising a total of forty presentations and seven discussions

covering topics such as infectious diseases and disease prevention, human rights issues and socioeconomic influences, governance and civil society, international



Left: A return to normalcy in Taiwan; scene from August 2020 when no more domestic COVID-19 outbreaks had occurred. Photo by author.

Taiwan, COVID-19, and the fortuitous lack of politics

Chun-Fang Wu

Following Taiwan's first case of SARS in March 2003, an internal outbreak occurred at Heping Hospital in April. As the hospital was urgently sealed off and isolated from the outside world, many hospital workers suddenly found themselves trapped in a dangerous situation, lacking any means of an effective response to the virus or procedures for treatment in isolation. Lee Yuan-teh, who served at the time as superintendent of National Taiwan University Hospital, recounts that a key factor contributing to the explosive increase in hospital outbreaks at the time had been the disagreement between Taiwan's central government and the Taipei municipal government.

Seventeen years have since passed but memories of the Heping Hospital shut-down and images of hospital workers holding pickets in protest still remain ingrained in

the minds of the Taiwanese people. Mask wearing has become a well-established practice in Taiwan as a result of this. With the appearance of a similar respiratory disease seventeen years later, the country immediately went into a state of vigilant, wartime preparation to avoid previous mistakes. Daily press conferences were held for the public by the central government in order to report on the current state of affairs in dealing with COVID-19, and all questions put forth by the press were answered with great patience. This led the Taiwanese public to become fully informed of the situation and actively follow government guidelines regarding the wearing of masks and social distancing. Consequently, Taiwan was able to successfully halt the large-scale spread of the virus. In June of 2020, the government relaxed social distancing measures, allowing the Taiwanese public to return to their normal daily lives. Given the current global situation

order and global governance, public diplomacy and international development cooperation, these events provided an opportunity for researchers to come together (on-line) to diagnose in detail the current situation of, and tasks facing, both individual countries and wider regions.

The experience of the past six months has made it clear that prospects for the future must emerge from a consensus that is shared beyond borders. It may also be suggested that when the dust settles, a 'new normal' must be created in the post-COVID-19 world. Lessons have been learned from the ongoing pandemic and new directions have been discovered amidst the chaos, the most important of which is that the negotiation of this new normal must take place based on an ethos of openness and sharing, alongside the construction of a database in which the curation of field experience as well as traditional forms of data occurs, and it must involve the expansion of multi-layered global cooperation.

Currently, SNUAC is seeking to contribute to the negotiation of the new

normal by forming the Seoul National University COVID-19 Research Network (SNUCRN; <http://snuac.snu.ac.kr/snuacr>) with local and international researchers. Research topics relating to COVID-19 that are currently being explored by this network include the comparative study of global metropolises and the comparative study of East Asian regions; the publication of Country Reports for major countries and the building of a database with the data from these reports is also taking place. However, in order to truly overcome the effects of the pandemic in the long-term and the cumulative influence of COVID-19, the building of a new paradigm with much more global cooperation and mutual assistance must take place. SNUAC anticipates future cooperation with overseas experts and research institutes and welcomes any suggestions for opportunities of collaboration in the creation of a new normal.

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brought on by COVID-19, it is almost a miracle that all schools in Taiwan were open and fully running in the first half of this year and have also re-opened in September after the summer break. It is now even possible to safely travel throughout the country.

Resistance against infectious diseases is, in theory, a matter of public health; in reality, however, it also happens to be the battleground of political warfare. It was once said by a member of the opposition party that "Taiwan was lucky". Although this phrase was used to mock the ruling party, I too wish to use this phrase when addressing Taiwan's basic success in resistance against the COVID-19 pandemic, albeit from a different perspective. Firstly, it is important to note that Taiwan's heated presidential, vice-presidential, and legislative elections were held this year on 11 January, prior to the global spread of COVID-19. This meant that opposition to the government's policies on COVID-19 based on political reasons, which would have hindered the fight against the pandemic, was mitigated to some extent. Throughout the world, elections that have taken place or are due to take place in the COVID-19 era have illustrated how the contesting positions of the ruling and opposition parties concerning policies for infectious disease prevention have led their respective supporters to maintain different perceptions regarding COVID-19 prevention, which has proved unhelpful in the fight against the virus. Given this situation, the fact that the Taiwanese elections had already taken place can be regarded as being fortuitous indeed.

Secondly, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)'s presidential candidate won re-election by a landslide margin of 2.64 million votes. This vote of confidence allowed the president to feel secure enough to step back, along with her administrative bureaucrats, and willingly hand over the task of fighting the spread of COVID-19 to those specialists, such as doctors and public health officials, who knew best. As a result, the public came to regard the government's policies regarding COVID-19 prevention with confidence and followed the guidelines accordingly.

Thirdly, there was a common basis of understanding shared by the central and local governments. The majority of the local governments were headed by members of the opposition party and questions and disagreement was put forth to the central government. This is, of course, to be expected in a democratic country. However, the opposition party was also keenly aware of the critical nature of the times and therefore, in the end, co-operated with the central government on issues of COVID-19 prevention. A notable event was the request made in early February by the head of the local government of the Kinmen

Islands, which had consistently supported the opposition party (Kuomintang), to temporarily halt connections between the islands and Xiamen, China, which had been established according to the Mini Three Links (小三通) policy. This was only the second time that links between the Kinmen Islands and Xiamen had been disrupted since exchange relations were first established nineteen years ago – the first disruption had taken place seventeen years ago, at the time of the SARS epidemic.

Fourthly, the Taiwanese public is well-informed when it comes to matters of public health. The experience of the previous SARS epidemic led not only to annual simulation training exercises at hospitals but also to a change of habits throughout Taiwanese society, the wearing of masks being a key example. Since wearing masks at the hospital or on public transport had become a norm, when the supply of masks was unstable in the early stages of COVID-19, the Taiwanese people offered to donate extra masks, which they had stocked at home, to medical staff. The government's swift decision to regulate the export of masks was also met with support from most members of Taiwanese society; those few who expressed opposition were met with great criticism. This is because the public was well-aware that wearing masks was the most effective means of preventing the spread of respiratory diseases. The ruling party's decision to hand over the reins to doctors and specialists in the fight against the virus also sent out the message that the government regarded with utmost importance the lives and well-being of its citizens. Accordingly, the public had few complaints in adopting to a new way of life that required constant mask-wearing and vigilant handwashing and disinfection.

Although COVID-19 is currently being contained with great success in Taiwan, constant vigilance is required until a vaccine is produced. This is the message that is continuously being stressed by the Taiwanese government. The fight against infectious diseases is a long one but when things are seen to have returned to normal, Taiwanese politicians will return to the political ring for another round of fighting. Once this happens, the current conflict between the US and China will inevitably have an influence on Taiwan's policies for disease prevention, as well as its political and economic policies in the post-COVID-19 era. If politics begin to gain the upper hand on disease prevention in the second half of 2020, the scenario that Taiwan may face is worrying indeed.

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