

The Politics of the Pandemic in South Korea

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Abstract

This study analyzes how South Korea was able to effectively control the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic from a critical perspective. It departs from cultural or regime-type arguments and instead pays attention to the political and institutional conditions under which the South Korean government was able to implement extensive testing, identify the infected, and quarantine them immediately. The study advances that infrastructural capacity and democratic accountability are necessary to preemptively and efficaciously respond to the pandemic. Yet, it also cautions against idealizing the Korean case without addressing critical questions about deeply penetrating surveillance-technology infrastructures and labor-market disparities that have worsened under the pandemic. Highlighting a multifaceted and complicated picture of the politics of the coronavirus in South Korea, the study aims to deepen understanding of the relationship between the political-institutional dynamics and the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, democratic accountability, inequality, institutional infrastructure, labor, pandemic, state capacity, South Korea, surveillance technology.

COVID-19 is the most devastating infectious disease in our time. More than nine months into the pandemic since the first case was identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, the virus is far from being contained as the world breaks the record for new cases every day. Globally, as of October 5, 2020, there had been more than thirty-four million confirmed cases of COVID-19, including one million deaths, reported to the World Health Organization (WHO). While the world repeatedly has witnessed the outbreak of epidemics in different regions in recent decades, such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Ebola, COVID-19 is spreading with unprecedented

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speed and scale, and has changed daily lives in ways that could not have been imagined. The current COVID-19 global crisis is rapidly sweeping away the world as it was previously experienced. Extreme emergency measures such as lockdowns, self-isolation, and border closures have become the new normal, and their effects on the world economy are tremendous, from halting the operations of most businesses to ushering in record-high unemployment rates.

While every country has been disrupted by the pandemic, COVID-19 responses and the scale of casualties have differed significantly across the world. Many so-called advanced Western countries, such as the United States, Sweden, Belgium, and the United Kingdom, failed to respond promptly to the pandemic, exposing ineffective crisis-management systems and resulting in horrifying casualty rates. By contrast, New Zealand, Taiwan, Vietnam, and South Korea are considered to have contained the virus quite effectively. South Korea (hereafter Korea) is a particularly notable case: without implementing radical measures such as closed borders or a complete lockdown like other countries, it has managed to flatten the curve and maintain lower fatality rates. As of October 5, 2020, the total number of cases had reached 24,164, with the death count at 422. The number of daily cases has remained around seventy a day—down from a peak of around nine hundred new cases a day in late February. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Korea is projected to experience only a slight economic impact, with its economy shrinking by 0.8 percent, compared to an OECD average contraction of 8 percent.¹ Moreover, as the only country holding a national legislative election in April in the midst of the pandemic, Korea has been cited by foreign media, health experts, and political leaders as an exemplary case of a nation successfully managing this global crisis.

This essay analyzes how Korea was able to effectively control the outbreak from a critical perspective. Some Western commentators have maintained that Confucian values such as collectivist culture and obedient citizens were the key to containing COVID-19 in Korea.² Others argue that the regime type is important regarding disaster response, that is, a democratic system is better equipped than authoritarian regimes to avoid a massive public-health crisis.³

¹ OECD, “Economic Outlook June 2020: The World Economy on a Tightrope,” <http://www.oecd.org/economic-outlook/june-2020> (accessed August 10, 2020).

² Max Fisher and Sang-Hun Choe, “How South Korea Flattened the Coronavirus Curve,” *New York Times* (March 23, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/world/asiacoronavirus-south-korea-flatten-curve.html> (accessed August 10, 2020); Timothy Martin and Marcus Walker, “East vs. West: Coronavirus Fight Tests Divergent Strategies,” *Wall Street Journal* (March 13, 2020), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/east-vs-west-coronavirus-fight-tests-divergent-strategies-11584110308> (accessed August 10, 2020); and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, “Insight Series Episode 1. Guy Sorman Speaks on Post-Corona Era: Culture and Society,” May 11, 2020.

³ Larry Diamond, “Democracy versus the Pandemic: The Coronavirus is Emboldening Autocrats the World Over,” *Foreign Affairs* (June 13, 2020), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2020-06-13/democracy-versus-pandemic> (accessed August 10, 2020).

Instead of these simplistic explanations, this study pays attention to the political and institutional conditions under which the Korean government was able to implement extensive testing, identify the infected, and quarantine them immediately. The essay argues that both infrastructural capacity and political accountability are necessary to respond to the pandemic in a preemptive and efficacious manner. Yet, caution is raised against idealizing the Korean case without addressing critical questions about deeply penetrating surveillance-technology infrastructures and labor-market disparities that have worsened under the pandemic. Highlighting a multifaceted and complicated picture of the politics of the coronavirus in Korea, the study aims to deepen understanding of the relationship between the political-institutional dynamics and the pandemic.

The following section describes what policies the Korean government implemented to contain the virus from a comparative perspective. Next, there is discussion of why prevailing views are incomplete in explaining the relative success of Korea as well as an explanation of state capacity and political accountability that helped to produce a positive outcome. Then, the essay addresses relatively unexplored but critical questions that the images of a successful Korea have not fully uncovered—extensive surveillance infrastructures and the danger of infringement of privacy and basic rights, along with the exacerbation of risks and inequalities in the labor market. The essay concludes with a discussion of the implications of the Korean case regarding the pandemic, political governance, social rights, and democracy.

How Korea Controlled the Coronavirus: The Government’s Capability and Its Prompt Measures

Without imposing a full-scale lockdown or a complete travel ban during the pandemic, Korea has managed to restore some version of normalcy. After implementing strict social distancing and shutdowns of public facilities such as museums, sports complexes, theaters, and churches for a few months, the daily numbers of confirmed cases subsided into the low two digits by early May. The government finally loosened the regulations, transitioning from “intense social distancing” (*kogangdo sahoejök kōridugi*) to “a new routine distancing in daily life” (*saenghwal sok kōridugi*) beginning in early May. After two months’ delay, secondary schools finally opened with a hybrid system in which students go to school only once a week, taking online classes on other weekdays. Since July, a limited number of baseball fans (10 percent of the stadium capacity) can watch games in person. In a recently released report, the OECD noted that Korea was experiencing the shallowest recession among OECD countries, thanks to the government’s prompt response to the pandemic.⁴ Now, five

⁴ OECD, “Economic Outlook June 2020.”

months into the relaxed rules, Korean society has yet to witness a significant surge of the virus, and seems to have the pandemic under control.⁵

Interestingly, both Korea and the United States had their first confirmed COVID-19 cases on January 20, 2020. In the ten months since, however, the two countries have taken drastically contrasting paths. The United States had a total of more than seven million cases and more than 200,000 deaths as of October 5, 2020, whereas Korea had a total of 24,164 cases and only 422 deaths. The United States alone accounts for more than 20 percent of the world's cases and deaths from COVID-19, and even President Trump recently tested positive. With an incapable government and divisive leadership, no consistent national plan, no solid health-care system, and an uninformed public, the United States is currently witnessing the worst public-health crisis in the world. By contrast, Korea contained the virus within a short time and avoided a public-health disaster through extensive testing and rigorous quarantine measures—common strategies among countries that have battled against COVID-19 relatively successfully. But where do these divergent responses come from? How can we explain them?

One early explanation for the success of Korea's response to COVID-19, offered particularly by respectful Western media, stressed Confucian ethics embedded in Korean society. Commentators observed that Confucian culture allows the paternalistic state to take privacy-intruding measures, while collectivism-oriented citizens easily conform to state directives for public safety.⁶ Such a culturalist argument is not only Orientalist in its nature but also fails to explain why Confucian Koreans were less successful in previous pandemics such as the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) outbreak fewer than five years before. Moreover, this culturalist argument cannot properly account for variations among countries. For example, why is Japan faring relatively poorly in flattening the coronavirus curve when it shares a number of cultural traits with Korea, or why can other countries such as New Zealand with no Confucian culture effectively contain the virus?

A more serious analytical question regarding the containment of the pandemic is whether regime types matter for the effective control of an unprecedented public-health crisis. Scholars ask if democracies fare better than autocracies in containing the health and economic effects of the virus by juxtaposing divergent governmental response measures.⁷ However, such

⁵ In mid-August, the daily new cases increased to three-digit numbers for more than two weeks (up to 441 cases a day on August 27). The Korean government enforced stricter measures of social distancing to reduce the number, including closing bars and restaurants after 9 p.m., allowing only take-outs at cafes and bakeries, and fully switching to online classes at secondary schools. After two weeks of stronger measures and restrictions, the daily new cases declined to a double-digit number.

⁶ Fisher and Choe, "How South Korea Flattened the Coronavirus Curve," and Martin and Walker, "East vs. West."

⁷ Diamond, "Democracy versus the Pandemic."

a simplistic dichotomy—democracy versus authoritarianism—defies empirical reality, as we find no consistent relationship between regime types and effective disease control. Cases of success include both democracies and autocracies such as New Zealand, Taiwan, Korea, China, and Singapore. And a similar diversity can be found among failure cases, as evidenced by the United States, the United Kingdom, Spain, Brazil, and Russia.

By paying attention to specific institutional characteristics, other scholars argue that not *all*, but a specific type of democracy—social democracy—is effective in responding to the pandemic.⁸ For example, Thomas Pepinsky finds that, while there is no observed correlation between democracy and COVID-19 cases, social democratic countries (as well as developmental states) are more likely to have fewer COVID-19 cases. He suggests that the active role of the state in steering the national economy and collaborating with the private sector may have worked positively in containing the virus. More specifically, Patrick Heller points out that the legacies of egalitarianism, social rights, and public trust in the social democratic Kerala state in India equipped the state to tame the virus in a more responsive way compared with other states in India.

While Korea is not a social democratic country, it shares similar institutional characteristics with social democracy, such as active state intervention and a strong health-care system. Building upon state theories that emphasize state capacity to mobilize resources to carry out collective goals,⁹ this essay argues that institutional and infrastructural capacities effectively deployed by a responsible and accountable political leadership explain the politics behind Korea's successful containment of COVID-19.

Existing literature on the “developmental states,” which are characterized by high-performing and capable state bureaucracies and close ties between the state and private businesses, provides insights to explain how the Korean government responded to COVID-19 promptly and effectively. Originally coined by Chalmers Johnson, who analyzed the economic miracle in Japan during the post-war period, the term “developmental state” is applied to East Asian countries such as Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore, as they have achieved unprecedented economic growth due to centralized, coherent, and

⁸ Patrick Heller, “A Virus, Social Democracy, Dividends for Kerala,” *The Hindu* (April 18, 2020), <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/a-virus-social-democracy-and-dividends-for-kerala/article31370554.ece> (accessed August 31, 2020), and Thomas Pepinsky, “Political Economy and Democratic Capacity to Respond to Pandemics,” *Social Science Research Council* (May 21, 2020), <https://items.ssrc.org/covid-19-and-the-social-sciences/democracy-and-pandemics/political-economy-and-democratic-capacity-to-respond-to-pandemics/> (accessed August 31, 2020).

⁹ Elissa Berwick and Christia Fotini, “State Capacity Redux,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 21 (2018): 71-91; Peter Evans, *Embedded Autonomy: States and Industrial Transformation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); and Michael Mann, “Infrastructural Power Revisited,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 43 (2008): 355-365.

efficient state bureaucracies.¹⁰ Highly capable government officials recruited by merit into lengthy, secure careers are enabled to pursue long-term national goals and implement efficient industrial policies. Strong state autonomy (the ability to avoid capture by private interests) and a high state capacity (the ability to implement government policies oriented toward collective interests) are essential features of developmental states. Another central component of developmental states is embeddedness.¹¹ In order to promote economic development and accomplish national goals, states need to cultivate close ties with private businesses and induce them to invest in key sectors, while promoting their competitiveness and entrepreneurship in the global economy. Developmental states employ a carrot-and-stick strategy to discipline capitalists and to make them cooperate to achieve national goals.¹²

An exemplary developmental state in the 1970s and 1980s, Korea has developed an extensive state capacity to mobilize resources for national campaigns.¹³ Autocratic leaders such as Park Chung-hee (1961–1979) and Chun Doo-hwan (1980–1987) empowered the executive branch to mobilize resources and implement national projects, be it economic, political, or social. While the nature of collective goals pursued by the developmental state has changed from economic growth to social welfare under the democratic governments since the 1990s, the state structure—the efficient and capable state bureaucracy—inherited from the period of high economic growth has persisted over the last six decades. Such historical legacies of strong administrative institutions matter because state capacities are not created overnight.¹⁴ Pepinsky also finds evidence in the correlation between developmental states, in addition to social democratic states, and effective control of COVID-19

¹⁰ Chalmers Johnson, *MITI and the Japanese Miracle: The Growth of Industrial Policy, 1925–1975* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1982); Alice H. Amsden, *Asia's Next Giant: South Korea and Late Industrialization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Evans, *Embedded Autonomy*; and Robert Wade, *Governing the Market: Economic Theory and the Role of Government in East Asian Industrialization* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

¹¹ Evans, *Embedded Autonomy*.

¹² Vivek Chibber, *Locked in Place: State-Building and Late Industrialization in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), and Atul Kohli, *State-Directed Development: Political Power and Industrialization in the Global Periphery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹³ Amsden, *Asia's Next Giant*, and Wade, *Governing the Market*.

¹⁴ Daron Acemoglu, Camilo García-Jimeno, and James A. Robinson, “State Capacity and Economic Development,” *American Economic Review* 105–108 (2015): 2364–2409, and Jonathan K. Hanson and Rachel Sigman, “Leviathan’s Latent Dimensions: Measuring State Capacity for Comparative Political Research,” unpublished paper, 2019. Hanson and Sigman offer a comparative index of state capacity by quantifying extractive, coercive, and administrative capacities. Among the 166 countries that they measured, South Korea ranked seventeenth, two ranks before the United States. See page 18.

and identifies the critical role played by the state.¹⁵ Korea's streamlined, well-coordinated government structure has worked well in the battle against the pandemic.

First, the guidance of capable and well-prepared health authorities—the Korean Center for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) housed under the Ministry of Health and Welfare—has been crucial in helping Korea avoid a massive public-health crisis. After the first confirmed case was reported in China, the KCDC carefully monitored the spread of the virus and prepared for the outbreak in Korea. Given its accumulated experiences fighting epidemics such as H1N1, avian influenza, SARS, and MERS, the KCDC developed a disaster-management system that was able to address the potential crisis and provide appropriate medical care promptly. Led by scientists and health experts, the KCDC has held daily briefings, released specific guidelines, developed detailed manuals for contact-tracing and -monitoring, and coordinated with local governments and health clinics. The proactive and competent response of the KCDC gained public trust and safeguarded panicking citizens from being manipulated by politicians trying to leverage public fear.¹⁶

One of the most important steps taken by the Korean government in the early phase of the outbreak was extensive and speedy testing. By expediting approval of a test kit, the Korean government made testing widely available. Such an efficient bureaucratic process was possible due to an almost symbiotic relationship between the government and private sectors, based on government support for the information and communications technology (ICT) sector and private companies' product development. Korea's research and development (R&D) spending was the fifth largest among OECD countries in 2018, and the proportion of R&D spending to gross domestic product (GDP) was the highest in the world.¹⁷ In particular, the Korean government has fostered both the biotech and ICT sectors. Five companies received R&D funding from the government to develop diagnostic products related to infectious diseases.¹⁸ Using high-performing computing and artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms, these companies quickly developed COVID-19 diagnostic kits. On

¹⁵ Pepinsky, "Political Economy and Democratic Capacity to Respond to Pandemics."

¹⁶ Some right-wing politicians and evangelical church leaders engineered fear and panic among conservative citizens for their own political ends. For example, more than ten thousand Christians and senior citizens protested against the current Moon government in mid-August in the midst of the pandemic and evangelical churches became the biggest epicenter of the virus in Korea. Right-wing politicians and activists have spread the narrative that the Moon government's measures for containing the virus are communist and suppress freedom of religion.

¹⁷ Ministry of Science and ICT, *The 2018 Survey of Activities of Research and Development* (Daejeon: Ministry of Science and ICT, 2019).

¹⁸ Government of the Republic of Korea, "Flattening the Curve on COVID-19: How Korea Responded to a Pandemic Using ICT," April 15, 2020, 21.

February 12, 2020, the Korean government authorized emergency use of the kits.¹⁹

The government further promoted speedy testing through walk-through and drive-through testing centers. These screening centers not only maximized testing capacities by making testing easier and faster, but also minimized the risk of infection.²⁰ With more than 640 testing booths across the country, testing capabilities were enhanced to test an average of twelve thousand people (and sometimes as many as twenty thousand) a day.²¹ By late July 2020, more than 1.47 million people (or 2.8 percent of the entire population) had been tested for the virus.²² Citizens could receive free and convenient testing and obtain results within twenty-four hours.

In addition to mass testing itself, the government closely monitored the population that could have been exposed to the virus, particularly travelers arriving from abroad. Instead of banning all foreign nationals from coming to Korea, the Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasures Headquarters (CDSCH) introduced special entry procedures to all incoming travelers to Korea as of March 29, 2020. Inbound travelers to Korea had to pass a temperature check, submit a health questionnaire, and abide by fourteen-day self-isolation, as well as be tested. It is mandatory for travelers to download a government-developed mobile app, Self-Quarantine Safety, which requires users to monitor and report their health conditions and symptoms to health authorities.²³ During this period, health-care workers are also assigned to check on them every day. Through this close monitoring system, the government has been able to prevent the further spread of the virus from overseas.

The government also developed an efficient emergency response system through the cellular broadcasting service (CBS). It enables government agencies to transmit emergency alert text messages on disasters to mobile phones through telecom carriers in Korea.²⁴ The system sends emergency alerts and guidelines for citizens, and *all* mobile phone users receive several COVID-19-related messages a day. For example, every resident receives an emergency text when the local government identifies newly confirmed cases. Each municipal government website posts specific information about the newly infected—their ages, the blocks in which they live, all the places to which they have been, how they became infected, and where they were tested and treated. The government regularly releases updates about new cases and issues warnings about potential virus “hot spots.”²⁵ Thus, those who happen to have been near the newly

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 26.

²¹ Justin McCurry, “Test, Trace, Contain: How South Korea Flattened Its Coronavirus Curve,” *Guardian* (April 23, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/23/test-trace-contain-how-south-korea-flattened-its-coronavirus-curve> (accessed July 31, 2020).

²² Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasures Headquarters (CDSCH) website, <http://www.safekorea.go.kr/idsiSFK/neo/main/main.html> (accessed July 31, 2020).

²³ Government of the Republic of Korea, “Flattening the Curve on COVID-19,” 35.

²⁴ Ibid., 8.

²⁵ Ibid.

infected can be identified and tested quickly to prevent such contacts otherwise going unnoticed for days or weeks. Metropolitan and local governments have the authority to immediately alert residents about urgent situations and thus can send these messages without approval from the Ministry of the Interior and Safety.²⁶ Due to such streamlined bureaucratic procedures, local governments are able to disseminate information quickly and arrange for those who may have been exposed to the virus to be tested immediately.

When health authorities identify COVID-19 patients, they provide proper and systematic treatment. The symptoms of confirmed patients are categorized into four levels from light to acute. Those with severe symptoms are hospitalized in intensive treatment centers (equipped with negative pressure rooms) as predesignated by the KCDC.²⁷ Those with mild symptoms are sent to treatment support centers (*saenghwal ch'iryō sentō*) with temporary isolation wards, where medical professionals closely monitor the patients.

The solid national health-care system further explains why hospitals were never overwhelmed and were ready to provide necessary medical care in the midst of the pandemic. In contrast to the United States, for instance, where the health-care system is privatized and medical expenses are often inaccessibly high,²⁸ the universal and largely publicly funded Korean health-care system provides easily accessible and affordable medical services. Korea has a high ratio of hospital beds to population (i.e., 2.3 beds per one thousand people), which is much higher than the OECD average of 4.7 beds per one thousand.²⁹ While most countries in the survey have undergone a decline in the number of beds with the average falling from 4.9 to 4.7 since 2012, Korea's number has increased from 10.3 to 12.3.³⁰ This ample health-care capacity enabled medical professionals to treat COVID-19 patients without sacrificing care for non-COVID-19 patients. Furthermore, the government promised to offer testing and treatment for free from the early onset of the pandemic. This policy encouraged those who had even slight symptoms to be tested voluntarily and enabled authorities to isolate the infected early enough to slow the spread of the virus.

In sum, the lesson to be learned from Korea's reaction to the pandemic is quite straightforward. It is not about "exotic" Asian values or about democracy itself but the key was a proactive government with institutional capacity, one

²⁶ Ibid., 9.

²⁷ Ibid. The KCDC designated 290 national safe hospitals as of March 6, 2020.

²⁸ Sonia Shah, "Welcome to the New Age of Contagions," *The Nation*, June 16, 2016. Shah maintains that the corporate influence on public-health agencies, including the World Health Organization, has dramatically increased over the years through budget cuts, acceptance of gifts from private parties, and the practice of a revolving door.

²⁹ OECD Health Statistics 2019, https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/data/oecd-health-statistics_health-data-en (accessed August 31, 2020).

³⁰ Ibid.

that acted swiftly and informed the public of the situation's urgency in the early phase of the pandemic. Having been forced to deal with numerous epidemics over the last several years, the Korean government had developed a highly efficient, well-coordinated disaster response system, using highly advanced ICT. By making testing widely available, locating and treating the infected in the early stage, and sharing information instantaneously with citizens, the highly capable state bureaucracy and health authorities have contained the coronavirus effectively.

Political Leadership and Democratic Accountability

Yet, we are still left unable to answer why, despite high state capacity and efficient state bureaucracy, the Korean government has not always been able to respond to disasters efficaciously. For example, only five years before, in 2015, the Korean government largely failed in its effort to contain MERS, ending up with the second most infections (186) and deaths (36) behind Saudi Arabia. What explains the difference between 2015 and 2020? Why did the Korean government respond to MERS late and ineffectively, while responding to COVID-19 quickly and efficiently? We turn our attention to political leadership and democratic accountability. The painful lessons learned from the past pressured the newly elected Moon government to act more responsibly and transparently, especially with respect to protecting citizens' lives.

While a historical legacy of strong administrative institutions is an important condition, as state capacities are not created overnight,³¹ state institutions are not static and constant. Institutional capacities may evolve and decay or may be deployed to varying effectiveness, depending on political leadership in times of national crises. In this sense, it is important to understand the political background of the current Moon Jae-in government that has overseen the state response to the pandemic.

First of all, it is crucial to understand the sequence from the fall of a democratically regressive and politically incompetent government to the birth of the incumbent administration. President Moon came to power in an early presidential election in May 2017 as a result of the nationwide candlelight protests in 2016 and 2017, which brought about the impeachment of the corrupt and incapable President Park Geun-hye. As such, the new government was mandated to improve popular representation, political transparency, and state competency in dealing with disasters and crises, in addition to its other democratic agenda. These popular demands came from the serious failures committed by the previous government under Park, particularly in its response to the sinking of the Sewol ferry in 2014 and the outbreak of MERS in 2015.

³¹ Acemoglu, García-Jimeno, and Robinson, "State Capacity and Economic Development."

Despite Park's familial inheritance of and ideological allegiance to the developmental state led by her father, Park Chung-hee, her administration was completely incompetent in the attempt to rescue the Sewol passengers, in addition to being opaque, if not distortive, in the ensuing investigation of the disaster.³² The rescue mission by the coast guard and the emergency headquarters established by the central government were complete failures, marred by haphazard and incompetent leadership and deceptive reactions to conceal the failures. President Park was misinformed about the magnitude of the disaster and aloof from the victims' families and the traumatized public at large. As a result, no passenger from the ferry's cabin was rescued. Of 476 passengers and crew members on board, 304 died, most of them high school students. The families of the Sewol victims became vocal activists demanding a thorough investigation and strict measures for public safety. They also represented the most critical voices against President Park during the candlelight demonstrations for the presidential impeachment in 2016 and 2017.

The conservative government's response to the outbreak of MERS in 2015 was another political lesson that informed the current Moon administration. The Park government reacted in a haphazard manner, with various agencies passing off responsibility to one another. The central headquarters was reluctant to make relevant information promptly available to the public. According to a report produced by the People's Health Institute and Health Rights Network, a public-health advocacy group in Korea, government agencies revealed serious problems in their response to the MERS epidemic, such as a lack of transparent and trustworthy communication, fragile public health-care infrastructure, inadequate training and protection of health-care workers, and human rights violations during the quarantine measures.³³

With bitter lessons learned from the two preceding disasters, the government examined the existing resources for epidemic response and reformed the public-health system to improve national preparedness for natural and man-made disasters. Public safety was prioritized in public and private facilities and safety manuals were tested. The Infectious Disease Prevention and Control Act (IDPCA) was amended in 2015 to allow state agencies to collect and analyze relevant data. Therefore, when the COVID-19 outbreak occurred, the Moon government quickly established a control center within the CDSCH, and KCDC leaders held daily briefings to provide transparent communication of important information to the public. The KCDC acted promptly to increase its usual workforce of Epidemic Intelligence Service

³² Yoonkyung Lee, "The Sewol Disaster: Predictable Consequences of Neoliberal Deregulation," in *Challenges of Modernization and Governance in South Korea: The Sinking of the Sewol and Its Causes*, ed. Jae-Jung Suh and Mikyoung Kim (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 33-48.

³³ People's Health Institute, "Human Rights-Centered Response to a Crisis," unpublished paper, <http://health.re.kr/?p=2751> (accessed August 31, 2020).

(EIS) officers by rapidly training staff at approximately 250 local public health centers, hiring 300 private epidemiologists, and leveraging staff at eleven nongovernmental organizations that train and support EIS officers.³⁴ Also, many biotechnology companies had sprung up in the years between MERS and COVID-19, enabling public-private partnerships to develop and improve testing for the coronavirus.³⁵

The Moon government not only demonstrated political leadership in deploying institutional capacity to effectively contain the pandemic, but also showed its commitment to its democratic mandate by administering the legislative election on April 15, 2020, as originally scheduled. During the COVID-19 pandemic, holding regular elections has become a logistical challenge for many democracies. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, an intergovernmental organization that supports sustainable democracy worldwide, reports that between February 21 and July 19 more than sixty-seven countries and territories postponed elections at the national or subnational level, whereas forty-nine countries and territories held (re)scheduled elections.³⁶ Korea was one of the few nations that successfully administered a legislative election, with no vote-related coronavirus case found.

Korean voters showed their support for the incumbent government and its effective containment of the pandemic with a high turnout rate at 66.2 percent and a landslide victory for the Democratic Party (DP).³⁷ In the three-hundred-seat National Assembly, the DP and its satellite party gained 180 seats (163 district seats and 17 proportional representation seats) against the conservative opposition party, the United Future Party, which together with its own bloc party earned 103 seats (84 district seats and 19 proportional representation seats).³⁸

The examination of the Korean case in dealing with the pandemic demonstrates that it is neither a Confucian culture of collectivism and conformity nor a simple regime dichotomy of democracy versus autocracy that explains the effective safeguarding of public health in times of crisis of unprecedented magnitude. State capacities to create and mobilize medical,

³⁴ Government of the Republic of Korea, “Flattening the Curve on COVID-19.”

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, <https://www.idea.int/news-media/multimedia-reports/global-overview-covid-19-impact-elections> (accessed July 21, 2020).

³⁷ *BBC News*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52304781> (accessed July 20, 2020).

³⁸ The electoral law was amended right before the election. The number of district seats (253) and proportional representation (PR) seats (47) remained unchanged but the method of allocating the PR seats was altered. A compensatory method was applied for up to 30 PR seats and a parallel calculation for the rest of the 17 seats. The most central change in the revised law was lowering the voting age from 19 to 18 years old, adding more than 500,000 new voters to the entire electorate.

ICT, and administrative resources are crucial conditions, and these capacities are materialized only when democratically committed leadership is in power. Only when we understand the political sequence and lessons that gave birth to the current government, can we fully account for the efficiently coordinated and transparent measures taken by state institutions to contain the virus.

Surveillance Infrastructures: A Double-Edged Sword?

The prevailing view mainly stresses the positive aspects of the Korean case, yet this perspective overlooks a more complicated dynamic underlying the state's "successful" response. We argue that existing surveillance systems and security techniques in Korea also have formed a significant part of the effort to contain the virus. The seemingly successful state actions are embedded in particular legal and technological infrastructures that render surveillance ubiquitous in daily life.

Korea's IDPCA grants state officials access to the personal information of both confirmed and potential patients without a warrant.³⁹ Under this law, articles 6 and 34-2 refer to citizens' "right to know" and mandate that the Minister of Health and Welfare promptly disclose information about the "movement paths, transportation means, medical treatment institutions, and contacts of patients of the infectious disease." Health authorities can request private telecommunications companies and the National Police Agency to share the "location information of patients...and [of] persons likely to be infected." Each patient's specific whereabouts are meticulously acquired through CCTV footage, credit-card histories, and cellular geolocation data.

The centralization and publicization of personal information were possible because the laws that governed the use and disclosure of personal data were amended in the aftermath of the outbreak of MERS in 2015. While the Personal Information Protection Act (PIPA), Korea's data privacy law, prohibits the collection, use, and disclosure of personal data without prior informed consent of the individual, the revised 2015 IDPCA, a law that prevails over PIPA, allows public agencies such as the KCDC to collect and profile data during disease outbreaks.⁴⁰ Thus, with COVID-19, the amended legal framework allowed the government to acquire relevant and necessary data, to rapidly trace the infection routes of confirmed patients, and to reveal critical information to the public in order to curb outbreaks.

³⁹ Brian Kim, "South Korea Has the Legal Infrastructure to Fight Pandemics, the U.S. Doesn't," *Global Asia* 15, no. 1 (March 2020), https://www.globalasia.org/v15no1/focus/south-korea-has-the-legal-infrastructure-to-fight-pandemics;-the-us-doesnt_brian-j-kim (accessed July 20, 2020).

⁴⁰ Sangchul Park, Gina Jeehyun Choi, and Haksoo Ko, "Information Technology-Based Tracing Strategy in Response to COVID-19 in South Korea," *JAMA* 323-21 (2020), pp. 2129-2130, <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2765252?fbclid=IwAR09NRucNRPhj0NyfumW3814-17w3elv36AHK-9tB5KnkCIdxIqzs6qm-IU> (accessed July 6, 2020).

These legal provisions can work effectively only within a highly developed technological infrastructure. A global leader in ICT, Korea has one of the most extensive broadband and mobile networks in the world, and almost everybody has access to the internet. Nearly all Korean citizens currently own mobile phones, with 95 percent owning smart phones. Approximately 860,000 4G and 5G transceivers, which cover the entire country, record phone locations automatically with complete accuracy.⁴¹ In addition, other security tools are widespread in Korea. For example, as of 2015, there were almost 740,000 CCTVs on the streets, and about 1.5 million CCTVs in both public and private places, which amounts to thirty-four persons per CCTV.⁴² Most drivers in Korea also own automotive black boxes in their cars that record information related to car accidents—there are up to 4.5 million black boxes in total. Furthermore, as credit and debit cards with transportation passes are rapidly replacing cash as the primary means of payment, information on people’s daily routines is logged every second. Thus, state officials were able to take advantage of this existing surveillance infrastructure, which helped them to meticulously detect the movements of the newly infected and the time they spent at each location. It would be difficult to explain the containment of the coronavirus in Korea without mentioning the state’s enormous capacity to track and monitor its citizens.

With the initial outbreak under control but COVID-19 still a lingering danger, the government strengthened its monitoring system. For example, following a rise in the number of people violating the rules of mandatory self-quarantine, the government adopted a highly developed application to monitor those in self-quarantine more closely. Designed to alert health authorities of any abnormalities in location data, the system sends a warning signal if a phone is left in one place for too long or if any movement is not traced because it is assumed that the person has left his or her phone at home and moved outside. The government also announced that it would consider adopting an electronic wristband that would immediately send a signal to the health authorities if a person violated quarantine.⁴³

⁴¹ Jung Won Sonn, “Coronavirus: South Korea’s Success in Controlling Disease Is Due to Its Acceptance of Surveillance,” *The Conversation* (March 2020), <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-south-koreas-success-in-controlling-disease-is-due-to-its-acceptance-of-surveillance-134068> (accessed July 6, 2020).

⁴² Ministry of Interior and Safety, *The Yearbook of Interior and Governance* (Daejeon: Ministry of Interior and Safety, 2016).

⁴³ Originally, the government intended to require the self-quarantined to wear wristbands, but after a strong pushback from the Human Rights Commission and other human rights civic organizations, it changed the plan so that only those who violate the rules of self-quarantine must wear wristbands. However, the overwhelming majority of citizens (80 percent) supported the adoption of a wristband for *all* the self-quarantined. See Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, “80% of Citizens Support the Adoption of a Wristband for the Self-quarantined,” Korean Government Policy Briefing website (April 10, 2020), <http://www.korea.kr/news/policyNewsView.do?newsId=148871385> (accessed July 6, 2020).

Recently, the government also adopted a QR code-based registration system for visitors to high-risk areas, such as bars, clubs, and religious and entertainment facilities.⁴⁴ Visitors to these facilities are required to download a one-time QR code via a smartphone app, which can be scanned at the door. By registering customers' information digitally, this new system can rapidly detect the infected and trace contacts once an infection arises. The nationwide commitment to overcoming the pandemic, combined with readily available high technology, has expanded and legitimized a deeply penetrating surveillance network.

While there is no doubt that Korea's response to COVID-19 has been effective, the extensive use of and reliance on surveillance systems and security techniques have also raised critical concerns about the infringement of privacy and other basic rights. Local authorities have released very private information on COVID-19 patients, including their gender and age; where (neighborhood and block) they live; where they go to school or work; what kind of transportation they use; and all the places where they have stopped.⁴⁵ Each patient's daily routine has become public knowledge. This release of abundant personal information arguably provides too many details about one's personal life—information that may not be necessary to contain the virus. The publicly revealed details of patients' particular behaviors have become a leading subject of discussion and criticism on the internet. For example, people quibbled over whether infected persons wore masks outside, or why they “unnecessarily” walked around and went to particular places. If the infected individuals are found to have not been careful about their movements, they are harshly criticized as “irresponsible” and “immoral” citizens who are “lacking in civic virtues” and stigmatized as spreaders of the virus. Indeed, according to one survey conducted in February, respondents felt *more* afraid of their specific whereabouts being publicized and the possibility of being publicly shamed for becoming infected than they were of the actual disease itself.⁴⁶

Consider the outbreak that originated in a night club in the Itaewon area in May 2020. A twenty-nine-year-old patient went barhopping in Itaewon—one of the trendiest neighborhoods in Seoul—a few days before he was diagnosed with COVID-19. Health officials traced his movements and published the nightclub locations he visited online. After some media outlets reported that the nightclubs' main clientele were LGBT people, hate speech against

⁴⁴ “S. Korea Launches Mandatory QR Code-Based Registration at Entertainment Facilities Amid Pandemic,” *Yonhap News* (June 10, 2020), <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200610001454320> (accessed July 6, 2020).

⁴⁵ Note that the government does not reveal the names of the infected, and instead identifies the patients by numbers.

⁴⁶ Woori Chang, “More Afraid of Social Stigmatization Than the Disease,” *Yonhap News* (February 4, 2020), <https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20200223047800004> (accessed July 1, 2020).

LGBT people proliferated on the internet.⁴⁷ Since many clubgoers were afraid of revealing their sexual orientation and getting outed in a society where homophobia is common, health authorities found it difficult to reach them. Some provided false contact information to the clubs and did not answer phone calls from the authorities. Although the local government solicited anonymous information, it was still able to identify people through location data from credit card records, security camera footage, and base transceiver station records. The fact that a total of 56,000 people associated with the Itaewon night clubs were tested within several days reveals the magnitude of Korea's testing capacity and infrastructural power. Yet, it also illustrates how surveillance systems are so densely instilled in every corner of society that it is nearly impossible to hide even the most private aspects of one's life under this extensive gaze. When the identities of racial or sexual minorities are exposed publicly, it places people in already vulnerable social positions at risk of experiencing even more hate speech and scapegoating.

In the COVID-19 state of emergency, nations face the challenging situation of striking a balance between public health and individual rights as societies negotiate the extent to which state surveillance can be legitimized for the sake of public safety. Over the last decade, tech companies have accelerated their data-gathering and tracing practices, and the pandemic will only facilitate the expansion of surveillance technology into public health and other sectors. Since the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. government has exercised invasive state power and restricted civil liberties through warrantless wiretapping and the reckless collection of personal records in the name of counterterrorism. And once a government establishes an expansive surveillance apparatus, it is extremely difficult to roll back, which opens the door to further uses of personal data.

Despite these concerns, Korea's people-tracking technology has been used relatively transparently and reliably under the current Moon Jae-in administration. Following advice from the Human Rights Commission and other NGOs that were concerned with the infringement of privacy and human rights resulting from the excessive release of personal information, the government finally limited the scope of released information about confirmed patients. According to the government, the personal information collected will be used only for the purpose of epidemiological investigation and will be automatically deleted after a few weeks. However, given the nature of surveillance programs that tend to grow beyond their original scope, caution must be raised against the normalization of mass surveillance and the possibility of antidemocratic practices. Recall that just a few years ago under the Park Geun-hye administration, the government and intelligence agencies investigated and surveilled private citizens critical of the government and compiled blacklists. There is always the possibility that the country's enormous

⁴⁷ "A Person with COVID-19 Visited the Itaewon Club," *Kookmin Ilbo*, May 8, 2020.

databases and advanced surveillance system can fall into the hands of a less democratic and less accountable government in the future.

The current pandemic moment raises critical questions about the relationships among emergency measures, political surveillance and monitoring, and democratic governance. While temporary harsh measures may be accepted widely during a crisis, it is also possible for authoritarian leaders to take advantage of this kind of emergency for their own political ends. What is happening in China, Hungary, and Russia materializes this concern. The ways in which surveillance techniques and infrastructures are addressed and what sort of consensus citizens will form on these issues in liberal democracies, including Korea, are, of course, different from those in less democratic countries. It will be a challenging task for any democratic country to pursue both public health and individual rights in the post-COVID-19 era. A government's strong commitment both to protecting public health and to dealing with private information with utmost caution will be necessary. Strict legal procedures should be stipulated clearly, in a way to restrict a government's reckless collection of private information. The usage of private information should be limited solely to containing the epidemic, and the collected information should be immediately discarded to avoid its use for other purposes.

While a government's commitment to protecting democratic institutions and norms is important, civil society should also monitor its government's actions closely. Advanced ICT is available not only to governments, but also accessible by ordinary citizens. Thus, monitoring is not unidirectional but can take place in both ways. Civil society organizations and NGOs should play an important role in pressuring governments to be politically accountable and responsible. There must be deep conversations about how to place a surveillance system under scrutiny and how to best protect *both* public health and privacy.

Pandemic, Social Inequality, and Precariousness

Although the Moon administration demonstrated effective response to the coronavirus crisis, the pandemic is still ongoing with no prospect of coming to an end in the near future. Even in the absence of a complete lockdown in Korea, the prolonged constriction of economic activities due to the pandemic is deeply affecting the financial well-being of citizens. As of June 2020, 1.23 million were unemployed, approaching the 1.49 million unemployed figure during the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997–1998, the most devastating economic disaster in the nation's history.⁴⁸ According to employment statistics

⁴⁸ Korea Statistics, http://kostat.go.kr/portal/korea/kor_nw/1/1/index.board?bmode=read&aSeq=383865 (accessed July 15, 2020).

for June 2020, 353,000 jobs had disappeared compared to the same month the year before, with women suffering more (minus 224,000) than men (minus 129,000).⁴⁹ This is because women work in sectors such as retail, restaurants, and hotels that are hardest hit by the economic slowdown.

Moreover, the pandemic-caused economic downturn is amplifying pre-existing inequalities, such as chasms in the labor market and the social safety net, while adding new dimensions, such as work-related risk of virus infection. The highly infectious virus has forced much work to be carried out remotely, but such a transition is available only for certain types of work, particularly in relatively well-paid white-collar and professional jobs. Essential workers in health care, personal-care work, and retail must maintain in-person interaction and face increased risk of infection as well as an intensified workload. Based on U.S. Department of Labor data, Marcus Lu visualizes the relationship between annual income and exposure to the virus and finds that only 29 percent of Americans have the option of working at home.⁵⁰ The occupations without such an option, and thus exposed to high risks, are usually low-paid and mostly performed by women.

Such gender vulnerability to infection is similar in Korea but given the serious chasm in the labor market between regular workers and irregular workers, with the latter being predominantly women, the effect is even greater on women in Korea. Workplace-based COVID-19 infections occurred in a nursing home in Bonghwa on March 3 (seventy cases), a hospital in Gyeonggi Province on March 6 (forty-two cases), a call center in Seoul on March 8 (ninety-four confirmed cases plus thirty-four family members), in a Samsung Service Call Center in Daegu on March 12 (fifty-seven cases), a nursing home in Daegu on March 16 (eighteen cases plus fifty-seven inpatients), a Ticket Monster Call Center on May 13, a distribution facility in Bucheon on May 25 (eighty-seven cases plus sixty-three contacts), and another call center in Seoul on May 26 (eight cases).⁵¹

Such high-risk service jobs, with the exception of medical doctors (only 25 percent are women), are occupations primarily filled by women with relatively low pay. Women make up 95.8 percent of registered nurses, 96.1 percent of assistant nurses, 94 percent of paid care workers, 85 percent of social workers, and 70 percent of telemarketers and call center agents, all of whom work mostly under precarious conditions with an average monthly salary

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Marcus Lu, "These Are the Occupations with the Highest COVID-19 Risk," *World Economic Forum* (April 20, 2020), <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/occupations-highest-covid19-risk/> (accessed June 30, 2020).

⁵¹ Myung-hee Kim and Juyeon Lee, "Response to COVID-19 and Workers' Health Rights," Public Policy Institute for People, issue paper 2020-04 (2020): 1-31. The KCDC does not provide the occupational information of the infected persons; this information is based on news reports.

under U.S.\$2,000.⁵² Women workers in call centers, for instance, do not have the luxury of maintaining physical distance in their workplace, while speaking all day long to earn their living inside their offices. These office spaces are often nicknamed “chicken coops” because they are tight and crowded. Their workload has intensified during the pandemic due to the increased volume of online shopping and heightened demand for tele-service.⁵³ It is thus not surprising why call centers and distribution facilities became local epicenters of COVID-19.

Long hours and overtime work are other preexisting problems in the Korean labor market, which have been exacerbated for call-center and delivery workers during the pandemic. At least three delivery workers died from overwork between March and July 2020. Delivery workers testify that they often work over sixteen hours per day, delivering ten thousand items per month, to over three hundred locations.⁵⁴ Such intensified workloads have been caused not only because demand for no-contact delivery service has soared during times of social distancing, but also because remuneration is based on a piece rate in these low-paid, precarious jobs.⁵⁵ Korean labor law defines delivery workers not as regular employees but as “specially employed workers,” who are closer to independent contractors. As such, they are not entitled to labor rights and are not covered by labor law regulations or social protections such as paid sick leave or unemployment insurance.

The People’s Health Institute, a public health civic group, has found that women are more vulnerable to job loss, reduced salary, and increased care work at home during the pandemic.⁵⁶ The economic effect of reduced market activities hit precarious low-wage women workers first and hardest, and the closing of schools has imposed a greater burden on women, who on average spend six times more hours on household and family-care work than men.⁵⁷

⁵² Korea Women Development Institute, “Social Value of Care Labor, Policy Case Study of Foreign Countries,” unpublished paper (2018), <http://dl.nanet.go.kr/law/SearchDetailView.do?cn=MONO1201929109> (accessed July 20, 2020); Ministry of Health and Welfare, “Basic Information for Training of Qualified Healthcare Workforce in Korea,” press release (2019), http://www.mohw.go.kr/react/al/sal0301vw.jsp?PAR_MENU_ID=04&MENU_ID=0403&page=1&CONT_SEQ=351956 (accessed July 20, 2020); Seung-yoon Lee and Hyukjin Cho, “A Qualitative Research on the Precarious Employment and Social Security of Customer Service Center Subcontracted Workers,” *Social Security Studies* 35, no. 2 (2019): 1-34; and Kim and Lee, “Response to COVID-19 and Workers’ Health Rights.”

⁵³ *The Hankyoreh*, May 28, 2020, http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/economy/marketing/946902.html?_fr=mt2 (accessed July 20, 2020).

⁵⁴ *The Kyunghyang Shinmun* (July 8, 2020), http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?art_id=202007081610001 (accessed July 20, 2020).

⁵⁵ Kim and Lee, “Response to COVID-19 and Workers’ Health Rights.”

⁵⁶ Saerom Kim, Jin-Hwan Kim, Yukyung Park, Sun Kim, and Chang-yup Kim, “Gender Analysis of COVID-19 Outbreak in South Korea,” *Health Education & Behavior* 47, no. 4 (2020): 525-530.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

As a way to mitigate the financial difficulties experienced by citizens and corporations, the Moon government dispersed various emergency and stimulus packages, with funds secured through supplementary budget requests. The relief packages included a universal cash payment to every household in June in the amount of U.S.\$350–800, depending on the household size, and a targeted cash payment (expected in October) to the vulnerable self-employed and independent contractors, who are not covered by the employment insurance program.⁵⁸ However, the latter stirred a policy debate regarding the selection criteria and actual economic effect. The government has also pledged to spend tens of billions of dollars to transfer subsidies to firms to keep jobs, to provide loans to small- and medium-sized companies, and to purchase corporate bonds to ease liquidity flows. Yet, as the pandemic continues to slow the economy for an extended period, it remains questionable if such short-term relief packages can have meaningful effect on addressing either the existing or newly emergent inequalities in the market. Particularly daunting to the Korean economy is the huge size of the self-employed and precarious workers and the gender dimension of the labor market structure, which leave more than 45 percent of the working population unprotected in times of unemployment.

Conclusion

This study investigated why and how Korea was able to respond to the coronavirus pandemic better than other nations from a state capacity perspective. It stood against accounts that highlighted Confucian collectivism and conformity or a simple regime dichotomy of democracy versus autocracy. Instead, it strove to present a more contextualized and nuanced understanding of the politics of the coronavirus by revealing the relationships among infrastructural capacity, democratic accountability, and the pandemic. In its discussion of the measures that the central government deployed to contain the spread of the disease and the institutional infrastructure that enabled and undergirded the effective interventions by administrative and medical authorities, the study argued that infrastructural capacity deployed by a political leadership committed to democratic accountability was the key to success. Korea was able to implement extensive testing, effective tracing of potential cases, and timely treatment of the infected due to the central government's leadership and coordination with private actors in mobilizing a solid national health-care system, a well-tuned disaster response institution staffed by public-health professionals, and advanced information and communication technology.

As part of the essay's argument, it is also noted that the political background of the incumbent government contributed to its democratic accountability,

⁵⁸ Government of the Republic of Korea, "Flattening the Curve on COVID-19."

transparency, and competency in executing virus containment strategies. President Moon came to power as a result of the nationwide candlelight protests that brought down the corrupt and incapable President Park Geun-hye. Korean citizens were particularly furious about the Park government's responses to the Sewol disaster and the MERS epidemic. Born in this political context, the Moon administration was mandated to improve popular representation, political transparency, and state competency in times of disasters and crises. Therefore, Korea's successful containment of the pandemic should be understood as the result of institutional and infrastructural capacities effectively deployed by political leadership.

However, the study also cautioned against presenting the Korean experience as contradiction-proof by discussing critical questions about deeply penetrating surveillance infrastructures and labor market disparities that have deepened as a result of the ongoing pandemic. The highly efficient information technology infrastructure enabled the collection of too much detailed information about infected persons and their private lives. When this information was made public, excessive criminalization of infected individuals, including homophobic and xenophobic reactions, went viral, particularly in cyberspace and social media. The use of advanced ICT capacity in times of national emergency compels us to interrogate the slippery balance among political surveillance, basic civil rights, and democratic governance.

Although the Korean economy has so far seemed to undergo a less severe downturn than many other countries, the financial impact caused by the pandemic has nevertheless amplified pre-existing inequalities, especially affecting precarious workers who are the first to lose their jobs and who are only marginally protected by social-welfare programs. The pandemic has further added a new dimension to market disparities, as in the case of workers who do not have the option to work at home and are thus exposed to a high risk of virus infection, as well as workers who are pushed to intensify their workloads without access to proper safeguards in their workplaces.

As the pandemic continues with no prospect for complete containment on a global scale in the near future, it may be too early to make a full assessment of divergent state responses. Governments will strive to make additional policy adjustments and introduce new strategies for effective interventions. Yet, one conclusion that emerges from this case study of Korea is that a combination of public health-care infrastructure, information technology capacity, and accountable administrative leadership constitutes the best conditions for an effective response. The COVID-19 pandemic will shape our world in countless ways and challenge us to reflect on the direction our societies should take. COVID-19 makes us rethink what states are for, what institutional capacities need to be built, and how and by whom state institutions should be run, as we pass out of an era that prioritized market deregulation, small governments, and unconditional globalization.