

Cultural Differences in Reaction to the Covid Pandemic by Thais and Europeans

Pandemic, government rule and response

In late March 2020, most of Europe went into national lockdowns in response to COVID-19. This required people to only leave their house for essential shopping or medical needs, or to undertake one form of exercise per day. Educational establishments and non-essential retail were closed, as were the leisure and hospitality sectors.

All over Europe, an important measure was the one-and-a-half meter distancing rule, and a little later the compulsory wearing of a mouth nose mask.

In Europe, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered necessary large scale emergency government support for businesses and industries. The design and implementation of this support is crucial in avoiding domestic and international market distortions in the medium- and long-term.

As the incidence of cases declined, national restrictions were relaxed.

England transitioned to a localized response and only applied more stringent restrictions to specific areas with rising cases.

The Rule of Six prohibited people from meeting in groups of more than six hospitality locations had to be closed by 10 pm. People were encouraged to work from home where possible.

During the summer of 2020 there were fewer restrictions in Europe. Covid infections and hospital admissions diminished. On 1 june 2020 hospitality industry opened after 3 months closure.

Between 14 october 2020 and 5 june 2021 restaurants, bars and coffee shops had to close again.

A three-tier system was created on 14 October, with Tier 1 being the least strict and Tier 3 the most.

Tier 1 included the Rule of Six, so work from home, and the 10 pm rule, with the addition of closing businesses with music and dancing that open at night.

Tier 2 added no gatherings in indoor spaces between households, restricted travel, and increased the number of locations that closed.

Tier 3 prevented meeting in private outdoor spacing with non-household members and restricted restaurants and bars to table service only, with serving of alcoholic drinks only allowed when consumed alongside a substantial meal.

The European Commission authorised the first COVID-19 vaccine on 21 December 2020, after an evaluation by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and consultation with the EU Member States.

Vaccination started shortly afterwards, though in some EU countries (Netherlands, Bulgaria) vaccination started relatively late.

Protests against anti-Covid measures!

As the number of COVID-19 cases rises across the European Union, many member states are implementing stricter rules to curb the pandemic.

All over Europe there have been demonstrations against anti-Covid measures.

Measures include mandatory vaccination for certain professions, lockdowns or mandatory face masks for schoolchildren.

Many of the protesters are peaceful but clashes are becoming more frequent.

In Vienna some 40,000 people marched against the lockdown and mandatory vaccination. Some of the protests escalated into clashes.

Some 8,000 people took to the streets in Brussels, the capital of Belgium and also de facto of the EU. Here too, some of the demonstrators clashed with police. In Luxembourg, protesters stormed a Christmas market that was blocked for anyone not vaccinated.



Similar protests have escalated in the Netherlands too. Protests in the Netherlands have drawn hooligans and evangelicals. Just a few weeks ago, hundreds of people burned bicycles in The Hague and threw stones and other projectiles at police. Some right-wing politicians advocated the protests.



In Germany, there have been protests in a number of regions. For instance, in the German state of Saxony, where large gatherings are currently banned, people have been going on "walks" organized by far-right groups. Last Friday, protesters gathered with torches outside the private home of the health minister of the state of Saxony.

But what really is behind these protests?

The protests against the COVID measures draw an eclectic mix of people: the politically disenchanted, those who are anti-state, others who are esoteric, and anti-vaxxers. Some compare the demonstrations in Belgium with France's 'yellow vest' movement, seeing a combination of very different social groups which all have their own motivations.

The situation in Germany is similar. What unites protesters is frustration — not only with COVID-19 policies but also with democracy, with political institutions. In anthroposophist circles, anti-modern attitudes are also playing a role.

Actors from the political right are at the helm, organizing and mobilizing. Some still reject the argument that the far right has hijacked the protests: But they were there from the start. And none of the other protesters seemed to mind.

Amid the demonstrators in Vienna were members of the far-right so called Identitarian Movement and on its website the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) has been promoting the rallies. There is also support for the protests from members of the ultra-conservative Catholic community.

It always depends on the context and a country's political culture, But in the Netherlands for example, although evangelical Christians as well as hooligans have protested, there is also an ultra right wing party promoting demonstrations against the government's covid policies .

There are also huge differences even within countries: The roots of the protests in southwest Germany are in the left-wing alternative movement, whereas in east Germany, the demonstrators often are members of the right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD).

It's very often about much, much more than Corona. In France the right wing demonstrations were only superficially linked to the pandemic measures. It was actually always about Macron and his style of politics.

Now, In Germany, more and more anti-vaxxers are joining an increasing number of demonstrations in cities across the country. Mandatory vaccination scheduled for introduction in March is mobilising opponents of the jab as well as those in favour of the move.

People who believe Covid Vaccines are not safe, people who are against vaccination period, conspiracy theorists who believe the government is injecting us with drugs or microchips... Every week on the streets of German cities, tens of thousands of anti-vaxxers march and their numbers are growing.

Their motivations are diverse but their opponents, people in favour of vaccination, are running out of patience and hitting the streets as well.



In the Netherlands, too, protests were linked to criticism of the government's social policies.

There is a lot of fuel that can easily be ignited. In Saxony, the main issues were disenchantment with politics and democracy. In many places there's zero trust in politicians.

In the Netherlands, the cabinet fell over a scandal that left people with minimum wages out in the cold. The government took a record long time to form a new cabinet - with the same political parties and leaders as those who caused the scandal. Anti covid policy rioters attacked and threatened politicians, demolished shops and set fire to cars in several cities.

In Italy, a far-right opponents of vaccine mandates rampaged through a union headquarters and a hospital. Right-wing extremists also took these occasions to spread their anti-state and anti-democracy narratives.



The situation is escalating — but it has been doing so for months, and the protests are becoming increasingly radical in Germany, as well. According to the German domestic intelligence agency, it could be assumed that mandatory vaccination would intensify the aggressive attitude of the protest movement.

Many believe that even after the pandemic, the protests will continue. The central actors driving the radicalization have an interest in finding other motives for mobilization, such as policies to fight climate change. Probably, preparations are already underway.

COVID-19 has served as a catalyst for radicalization. It allows conspiracy theorists or extremists to create simple narratives, framing it as us versus them, good versus evil.

Outside Europe there have been anti covid policy demonstrations, as well. In India the People's Federation against Compulsory Vaccination staged a demonstration protesting against the government forcing people to compulsorily get COVID vaccine.



Thailand

Thailand was the second country to report a COVID-19 case in January 2020. The Thai Government kept the number of COVID-19 cases low for as long as September 2020, a result of an early lockdown and effective contact tracing strategy.

The measures taken by the Government slowed down the spread of the pandemic in Thailand, but they resulted in loss of jobs, incomes, businesses and food security for families and education for children. Unfortunately, subsequent waves and emerging new variants have imposed a major economic challenge on the country as the number of COVID-19 cases surged to over 2,000 cases per day in May 2021 and led to new strict containment measures.

National employment remained stable at 68% between March 2020 and June 2021. However, large variations were observed between regions and population groups. Employment declined by 8 percentage points in urban areas and the capital city, while it increased by 8 percentage points in rural areas and the northern region as many of those who lost their jobs due to the pandemic returned to agriculture.

More than 70% of the interviewed households experienced a decline in their income since March 2020, with around 80% of the households in rural areas, the southern region, and low-income groups experiencing income declines.

Farming activities and non-farm businesses were also severely affected by income declines, as about 50% of them experienced a decline in their incomes by more than half.

Households in the southern region and those in low-income groups were the most significantly impacted by income losses.

Many households reported running out of food, with proportions reaching 60% among low-income households and those with children. Households used several coping mechanisms during the crisis, the most common including reduction of food and non-food consumption, reliance on government assistance, reliance on savings, and engagement in additional income generating activities.

Over 80% of households benefitted from the Government emergency assistance programs introduced in 2020 (among other things a 600-baht Child Support Grant) , with proportions approximating 90% among low-income households and those who experienced income shocks. The proportion of social assistance beneficiaries in 2020 almost doubled compared to 2019.

Around 90% of households had all their children aged 6 to 17 years enrolled in school last semester.

Proportions are lower among lower income households (86%) than better-off ones (96%).

Over half of children attended mixed (face-to-face and remote) classes and one-fourth attended face-to-face only.

Around 57% of respondents indicated that enrolled children in their households faced learning issues, with children in rural and low-income households more likely to have difficulties in accessing learning devices.

Around one-third of households that needed medical assistance could not access the services due to concerns about getting infected with COVID-19.

Most people are aware of the availability of the vaccine and where to get it, mainly through media and social media.

At the time of the survey, concerns about the vaccine side effects were among the main reasons for reluctance to get vaccinated. More than 36% of the low education and low-income groups and the youth did not plan on getting vaccinated.

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The global slowdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic will take a heavy toll on Thailand's economy, which is reliant on exports and tourism. The sharpest economic shock since the 1997-1998 financial crisis will strain a society simmering with discontent and a political order designed to thwart popular political participation.

Why does it matter? Thailand's economic model was already faltering, and the political order contested, before the pandemic. The crisis accelerates Thailand's extreme concentration of power and wealth and deepens political divisions, which could trigger a social, economic and political reckoning.

The economic strategy that lifted Thailand to upper middle-income status by 2011 has faltered over the past decade, leading to severe inequality and rising poverty, and the pandemic has now slowed the growth model's twin engines – exports and tourism. Already facing questions about its legitimacy following a 2019 election marred by irregularities, the military-backed Thai government will be hard pressed to meet the needs of a population facing massive unemployment, loss of income and rising debt.

The fundamental problem is political: the reforms necessary to upgrade Thailand's economy run counter to the interests of the country's elite. What is needed is a new constitution that allows for articulation of popular interests through elected representatives and accountable institutions. The coronavirus could hasten a social, economic and political reckoning.

What everyone knows, and what slows control over the two youngest generations:

At the heart of Thailand's uneasy politics is an unsettled conflict over political legitimacy that may be traced to the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932. At issue is whether political authority should derive from popular sovereignty or a traditional hierarchy that claims a moral right to rule.

The nation's twenty constitutions attest to a Sisyphean effort to enshrine a system that mollifies the masses while preserving the prerogatives of a small, self-appointed elite whose power is rooted in its proximity to and loyalty to the palace. This conflict has roiled Thailand since late 2005, leading to two military coups, several rounds of mass protest and promulgation of two "permanent" constitutions. The outcome of all this turmoil is that power remains with the Bangkok-based establishment, comprising the army, palace and bureaucracy, as well as allied plutocrats.

The political order is designed to discourage any challenge to the status quo, as illustrated by the fate of the Future Forward Party. Founded a year before the election by young billionaire Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, the party placed third with some six million votes. Its platform of ending patronage, removing the military from politics and breaking up monopolies resonated with younger voters across the country. The courts and watchdog agencies swung into action to eliminate this direct challenge to the establishment.

The Constitutional Court disqualified Thanathorn as MP, then dissolved the party and banned its executives from politics for ten years. Thanathorn and other party leaders also face a range of criminal charges that could see them imprisoned. The result is that parliament no longer appears to many Thais as a viable route to political change. Before the COVID-19 pandemic made large gatherings impossible, protests had started to erupt across the country, with thousands, particularly among the youth, questioning the government's legitimacy. The state employs a range of tactics to discourage and punish its critics, from lawsuits to violence.



Though the government has performed well in handling the public health crisis, the pandemic's economic impact will be devastating. It will likely compound the failures of the country's outmoded economic strategy, but the legacies of the rigid political order mean that Thailand lacks the robust institutions to implement reform and upgrade the economy.

For the past decade, populist policies and the forbearance of millions of Thais pursuing increasingly precarious livelihoods papered over the deficiencies of the existing order. The coming crisis will cast a harsh light on the shortcomings of the economic system, such as extreme wealth inequality and an oversized informal sector.

The pandemic is likely to accelerate Thailand's extreme concentration of power and wealth and deepen political divisions, eating away at peoples' incomes, tax revenues and resources to build elements of a welfare state.

THAILAND & UN

In January 2020, Thailand became the second country to confirm a COVID-19 case but, since then, the country has shown remarkable resilience and, as of late July 2020, there had not been any recorded cases of domestic transmission for nearly two months.

Thailand's overall response, and ability to curb infections, has led the World Health Organization (WHO) to identify Thailand, alongside New Zealand, as a success story in dealing with the pandemic. Of course, that success entirely depends on continued vigilance, a whole-of-society approach, and ramped up testing to prevent a second wave as borders open and full economic activities are resumed.

The economic impact of the pandemic has been serious, with predictions of an 8.1 per cent contraction of the economy in 2020. According to a recent survey, 65 per cent of people in Thailand report that their incomes are totally or very inadequate under pandemic conditions, with almost the same percentage saying that their finances had been adversely affected.

Vulnerable communities bear the brunt
UNDP Thailand and a local NGO arranged for the delivery face masks to the ethnic community in Phuket province.

The Royal Thai Government's contribution to the UN's COVID-19 Fund speaks to this shared responsibility. Similarly, the role played by the 1 million health volunteers, two-thirds of whom are women, in contact tracing across the country speaks to the whole of society approach.

The government's stimulus packages have been comprehensive, rapid and well-sequenced, constituting 15 per cent of GDP. Almost half of respondents to a recent survey reported having received government support. Modelling estimates suggest that while government expenditure is emerging as the most effective means to support growth and employment, cash handouts followed by soft loans are the next best measures. In partnership with the National Economic and Social Development Council, the national economic planning agency of Thailand, UN Thailand will monitor the impact of these fiscal stimulus packages targeted at local economies to inform government programming.

The government will also need to closely watch the impact at the household level, and further refine the mix of stimulus measures with sharper targeting.

In terms of vulnerabilities, the impact assessment indicates that youth could potentially lose out the most given rising unemployment and with nearly half a million young people joining the labour force at a time when jobs are difficult to secure. Similarly, women and men are impacted equally, yet differently, which will serve as a drag to the recovery process.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



UN Thailand's strategy focuses on investing in partnerships with a clear-eyed view to build back better, while keeping the SDGs on track. The plan combines the direct health response based on the principle of leaving no one behind while investing in forward-looking policies to protect jobs and economies as well as to strengthen social capital.

Our immediate health response focuses on supporting the Government to strengthen surveillance and laboratory capacity, as well as to facilitate private and public sector engagement on vaccine research and pilot a “new normal” health service through tele-medicine. It also ensures that vulnerable groups such as migrants and refugees have access to PPE and health services.

In order to leave no one behind, UN Thailand has prioritised social protection, including successfully advocating for augmenting old age, child, and disability grants.

In dialogue with the Royal Thai Government, we are supporting real-time monitoring of gender-based violence and violence against children while strengthening prevention and response. The UN is also mapping digital infrastructure to understand geographies and communities that are underserved to bridge the digital divide and support e-learning platforms for schools.

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Conclusions:

1. for all people and for all governments the past two Covid years have been difficult
2. Governments in East and West have been under pressure to perform by both provaxxers and antivaxxers
3. Extreme right and left, but especially the right, have used Covid as an excuse to attack governments
4. Thailand is containing the pandemic, but at an enormous cost (in revenue and employment loss)
5. The West has all but contained the pandemic, at a higher loss of life, but probably at lower economic costs.

Thank you