

Covid-19: The era of perpetual emergency and the emerging new normal?

BLACK, WHITE AND GREY



ALI RIAZ

LITTLE did we know on the night of December 31, 2019 that we were about to begin not only a new year but a new epoch which can only be compared to a century-old calamity. The celebration of the 2020 new year was no less festive

than any others, but not even in our worst nightmare did we foresee a threat to the entire humankind being spread from a city in China called Wuhan. Billions of us were unaware of a letter delivered from the Chinese Health Authority to the Beijing office of the World Health Organization (WHO) on that day, reporting “cases of unknown illness” which practically foretold the deaths of many around the world.

Almost three months have passed since, a virus—Covid-19, is ravaging the world with no end in sight. Hundreds of thousands of people around the world have been infected, thousands have died; many don’t even know whether they are carrying the virus, or if their loved ones are at risk of being infected. Various projections have been made about the scale of the loss of lives—some are painting a dire situation; others offer a slightly optimistic scenario. Citizens of the superpowers and the poorest ones are on the same boat when it comes to searching for basic treatment—merely to prevent themselves from being infected. Scientists are racing against time to discover a medicine; a vaccine is now on trial. Economies of developed and developing countries are tumbling like houses of cards. World leaders are scrambling to find ways to deal with the situation. Debates are waged as to whether we knew it. Did we ignore the indications at our own peril? In a similar vein, whose fault is it? Is there someone to be blamed?

Even the most pessimistic person acknowledges this will not be the end of the world. The worst-case scenarios suggest billions will survive and the world will not be torn into pieces. The optimists insist that everything will be back to normal. The deniers, and yes there are deniers

revealed? How will the world look in future? What should we be vigilant about as the fight against the virus intensifies?

What has Covid-19 revealed?

Four aspects of the current world system have been laid bare by Covid-19. First, the state-centric security, which is the dominant paradigm in international relations and security studies, which shapes the policy options of all countries, particularly the Western nations; and determines priorities and budgetary allocations, is proved to be inadequate in saving people’s lives. Understandably, this is not new. The notion of human security—emerging in the early 1980s, and underscoring the primacy of individuals in addition to state security—has been a part of academic exercises and public rhetoric, but never demonstrated its need in a global scale, until now. The lesson today is that devoid of human security—states will only be at the mercy of nature while millions will die, and the state’s economy and politics will be upended. But unfortunately, the repeated use of the term “war” by policymakers all around the world shows that policymakers are yet to be out of

government been transparent and let the world know what was happening in the early weeks of December, the situation would have been different. The first series of cases of a new virus were noticed on December 10. Yet, doctors such as Ai Fen, a director at Wuhan Central Hospital, and Li Wenliang, a doctor from Wuhan, were reprimanded and questioned by security officials. Even after Chinese authorities reported the virus to the WHO, eight doctors faced questioning by the Wuhan Public Security Bureau, and an official at the Hubei Provincial Health Commission ordered labs, which had already determined that the novel virus was similar to SARS, to stop testing samples and to destroy existing samples.

It is no longer a matter of speculation as to what would have been the benefit if the world knew two or three weeks ago. A study by Dr Shengjie Lai of the University of Southampton in the United Kingdom examining non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) in response to Covid-19 in China shows, “if interventions in the country could have been conducted one week, two weeks, or three weeks earlier, cases could have been reduced by 66 percent, 86 percent and 95

but tracking them for their behaviours, including political views.

Such concern is not unfounded, because each crisis has allowed states to usurp powers. Unqualified support to an authoritarian regime’s strategy in monitoring people should not pave the way for a perpetual global state of emergency and provide intrusive powers to the state. Post 9/11, many countries joined the bandwagon of the global War on Terror, and authoritarian regimes have used these powers to prolong their repressive systems. Indications of such efforts are already palpable—Hungary’s prime minister Viktor Orbán has proposed an emergency bill that would give him sweeping powers to rule by decree for an indefinite period and curtail most fundamental rights. The legislation proposed at the British Parliament has all the mechanisms to curtail fundamental rights; the sunset provision of the new law is too vague to hope to come to an end soon. What these laws call “temporary” become permanent over time. The proposal to use technology, particularly data-tracking apps, to gather biometric data by the National

changes in the global power structure—is creating a vacuum. In this emerging multi-player landscape, other countries, especially regional powers, will play roles too. But how that will shape up is unknown.

Economy will recover: for whom?

The economic impact of Covid-19 will be astounding. The scale of the damage to the global economy cannot be ascertained as the crisis is unfolding as we speak, but a global recession is a realistic possibility by any measure. Despite such a scale of adverse impacts, we can be certain that the world economy will bounce back; it has rebounded from the Great Depression of the 1930s and the financial crisis of 2008. Governments are taking measures to address the situation with stimulus plans. As of March 22, one report suggests that “stimulus plans could cost the world USD 10 trillion”. The question, however, is what will be the structure of these plans. How will these help those who are at the bottom of the ladder? What emergency measures are being taken to ensure their daily livelihood during the crisis? In 2008, we witnessed how these stimulus plans became bailouts for corporations and



PHOTO: AFP/FT MONTAGE

Post 9/11, we have seen how surveillance mechanisms instituted by governments, including in the United States, curtailing fundamental rights and privacy, have become institutionalised. Covid-19 should not provide justifications for the widespread use of 4IR, for not only tracing citizens during emergency health situations but tracking them for their behaviours, including political views.

of the ongoing catastrophe, are finding either solace or arguments in their faith—religious or political; nothing will happen, they insist. With the unfolding of events, the helplessness of the state structures and global order are becoming obvious. There should be little doubt that the world will never be the same again. Covid-19 has already changed the world, and its consequences will be felt in our social lives, economy and global political landscape. The questions are—what has Covid-19 already

the state-centric security mindset.

Secondly, globalisation requires a reset. In the past decade, there have been two perspectives against globalisation—one is of unilateralism, insularity and pernicious nationalism. None other than US President Donald Trump and his administration best exemplifies it. The other is—globalisation’s benefits have been monopolised by a few, it should be completely discarded. As Covid-19 crossed the borders in days, it revealed we are more interdependent than we acknowledge, and it can’t be contained by one country or the other. A global pandemic requires a global response. Xenophobia is not the response that will protect anyone. Covid-19 should not be considered as the vindication of anti-globalisation nor a validation that globalisation in its current form is adequate. Instead, it has underscored the need for a new form of global framework which does not put profit and cheap labour in the driver’s seat, but human security, public health, public interests and human rights remain at the heart of this effort.

Thirdly, the inadequacy of the current system has been laid bare, including our obsession with the narrow definition of development. The global race to increase GDP, exploit natural resources and consume everything we find have become defining features of development. Scientists have told us in no uncertain terms that the virus originated in nature. Is this nature’s revenge of our utter disregard for it? To suggest the virus is nature’s revenge is not meant to be a fatalistic statement, but to remind us that it is a making of ours. Humans are part of a natural habitat, to be shared with others; but we seem to have forgotten this a long time ago. We have ignored science, which forewarned us.

Fourthly, the wild spread of the virus told us the importance of transparency in governance matters. Had the Chinese

percent respectively—significantly limiting the geographical spread of the disease.” It is neither an exaggeration nor a political statement that the absence of transparency in China has allowed the virus to spread. We knew the transparency of government is important for the citizens of respective countries, but coronavirus demonstrates that in this era, the adverse impacts are faced by those who live beyond the borders too.

A perpetual emergency?

With the spread of the virus, the first response needed was to contain it. In the past weeks, China’s success has been applauded. WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has insisted China’s success “provides hope for the rest of the world”. There is some skepticism about the statistics provided by the Chinese government; I don’t intend to engage in the debate about the veracity of the claim but draw attention to the means used to address the virus. Central to combatting the virus was the use of technology, particularly Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), big data, robots and autonomous platforms. It is reported that AI and big data helped in effectively quarantining and monitoring social distancing.

But the success has also revealed how intrusive the surveillance system of China has become. Smartphones, face-recognising cameras and mobile apps not only identified, traced and tracked Chinese citizens but also reported who they are getting close to and interacting with. Is this going to be the new normal in a global scale? Post 9/11, we have seen how surveillance mechanisms instituted by governments, including in the United States, curtailing fundamental rights and privacy, have become institutionalised. Covid-19 should not provide justifications for the widespread use of 4IR, for not only tracing citizens during emergency health situations

Health Service (NHS) in Britain has already raised concerns. A combination of such unrestrained power and technology will be lethal for now and the future.

A new world order emerging?

In the past days, a consensus among analysts has emerged that we won’t be returning to the pre-coronavirus world order. Events such as increased differences between Europe and the United States on how to battle the virus, China’s robust actions to help the affected countries like Italy, verbal spats between the Trump administration and China on who is to be blamed and Russia’s stealthy way of avoiding the crisis, are indicative of the shift. The United States has become totally absent in the global landscape while it continues to struggle to deal with the mess inside. The world order was already witnessing a transformation since Trump came into power, thanks to the Unites State’s insular foreign policy and withdrawal from various international treaties. Covid-19 has sped up change. But what will be the new global power structure is unclear and perhaps one can ask whether it will be a new “order” or chaos. Discussions, thus far, have been viewed through the prism of US-China relationships. US-based analysts have underscored how China is trying to weave a new narrative that situates it in a leadership position. For years, many have argued that China is failing to use its soft power, but past weeks have shown that China is adept in its campaign and the use of soft power to gain the leadership position.

At times of global crisis, leadership at the global stage is essential. A unipolar world is dangerous but so is a leaderless global system. On previous occasions, whether it is the Ebola pandemic or 2008 economic crisis, the US led the way. But the abject failure of US authorities to address its own problems and act as a key player has put itself behind. The abdication of power and influence by the US—in part by choice, in part due to

big businesses, how elites benefited from these emergency interventions. These have accentuated the already existing economic inequality in societies—from the United States to Bangladesh. The adverse impacts of the neoliberal policies which are borne by those who are in the bottom of the society will be hit hard, but if these stimulus plans do not address those who are the most vulnerable, the economic recovery will be a hollow one. Besides, with growing distrust on institutions and leadership in various countries, it will be a recipe for chaos. The emergency economic plans should be followed by plans to invest in public health and human security dimensions; perhaps the process should begin with a promise built into the stimulus plans.

A new society?

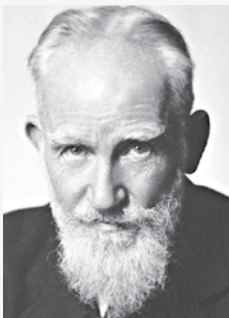
The most effective tools in fighting the spread of coronavirus are social distancing and quarantine. We are learning how to live alone and remain inside our home. But will the social distancing be the new normal even after the threat is over? At a time when the new generations were becoming more attuned to technology than to human interactions, this will have an impact on social cohesion if the social distancing continues for long. Societies do not change overnight but events of this magnitude make indelible marks. Whether neighbours will be suspicious of others as a potential carrier of the virus is something to be seen; as we know elderly populations are more vulnerable, will we be more compassionate to them in the future or will it be the opposite?

In the past weeks, Covid-19 has either unleashed or expedited changes in global politics, the economy, and society. We don’t know when it will end and what the future will look like, but we know for sure we won’t be going back to the world we left on the night of December 31, 2019.

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QUOTABLE Quote



GEORGE BERNARD SHAW (1856-1950) Irish playwright, critic and political activist

Beware of false knowledge; it is more dangerous than ignorance.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Wine valley

5 Seine straddler

10 Make ashamed

12 Plain silly

13 Like some colognes

14 Joe of "The Irishman"

15 Slalom maneuver

16 "Golly!"

18 Consider appropriate

20 Seine summer

21 Boyfriend

23 Roulette bet

24 Primary

26 Kisser

28 Scoundrel

29 Has dinner

31 Unmatched

DOWN

1 New parents' choices

2 Mistreat

3 Out of style

4 Inquire

5 Water bearer

6 Over again

7 Bacon strips

8 Spurs on

32 Start a round

36 Flowering plant with a citrusy scent

39 Spoil

40 Contract add-on

41 Michelangelo work

43 Stood

44 Heart, for one

45 Dancer's boss

46 Vaccine pioneer

9 Confiscated

11 Health class topic

17 Greek vowel

19 G-man's org.

22 Musically cheery

24 Amber wine

25 Appended

27 Take advantage of

28 Hooded snakes

30 Georgia airport code

33 Letter after psi

34 Deadlly

35 Candid

37 Top-rated

38 Geometry calculation

42 Auditing org.

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

C	A	N	C	E	L		S	H	A	G
A	P	O	L	L	O		P	E	R	U
P	E	R	I	L	S		R	A	C	Y
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BETTER BAILEY by Mort Walker





BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott







