



South Korea's Policy in Flattening the Curve on COVID-19 without Lockdown: A Lesson Learned

By

Marina Ika Sari

Researcher at The Habibie Center

marina@habibiecenter.or.id

Introduction

South Korea confirmed its first case of COVID-19 on 20 January 2020 with the first infected patient being a woman from Wuhan, China.¹ In its development, the coronavirus in South Korea suddenly spread massively due to cases that occurred at the Shincheonji Church and at one point placed South Korea as the world's second-largest outbreak of coronavirus, after China. Up until April 16, 2020, the number of COVID-19 cases in South Korea reached 10,613.² In responding to COVID-19, the government of South Korea has garnered praise from around the world because it is considered to have introduced effective policies in controlling the pandemic. Without a lockdown, South Korea was able to reduce the death rate due to the coronavirus to only about 2.1 percent. What is the situation of coronavirus development in South Korea? What are the policies adopted by the government of South Korea in controlling the coronavirus spread? How has the implementation gone?

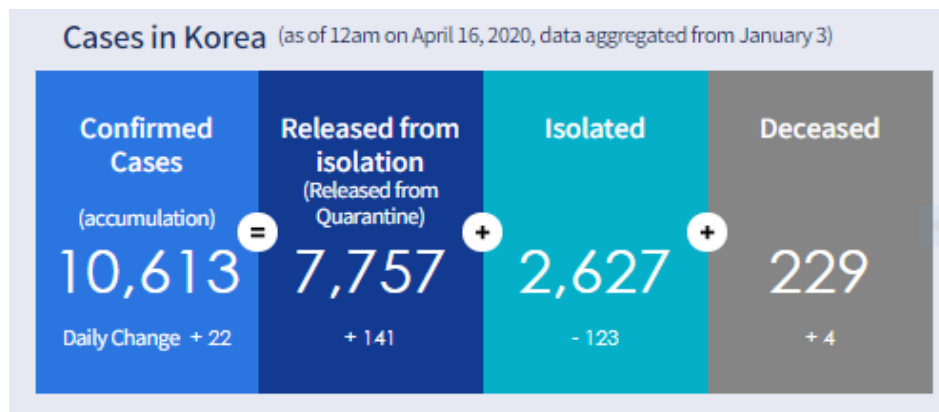
Spread of COVID-19 Cases in South Korea

The first wave of the spread of COVID-19 in South Korea occurred on 20 January 2020, with the first case of infection being a woman from Wuhan, China. Then, a second wave occurred when COVID-19 spread massively as a result of a religious group activity at the Shincheonji Church located in Daegu.³ It started when South Korea's 31st patient, a 61-year-old woman who tested positive for the coronavirus, attended a religious event along with around 1,000 other people.⁴ After this activity, the COVID-19 cases in South Korea suddenly increased drastically 180-fold in a period of two weeks and reached its peak with the addition of more than 900 new cases a day on 28 February 2020.⁵ The authorities also named this church cluster as a "super-spreading event".⁶ As a result, Daegu is the most coronavirus-infected

region in South Korea, with a representation of 64% of the total national cases (as per April 16, 2020).⁷

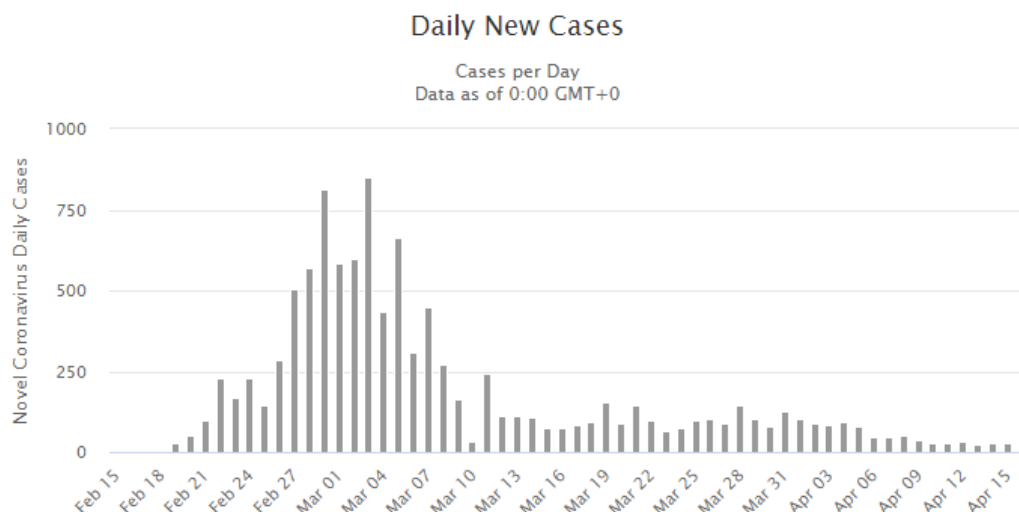
Although the number has reached 10,613 cases, the number of daily new cases has now tended to slow down and the curve is flattening. Further, the number of patients who have recovered is more than the number of patients who have died, which is about 70% of the total cases of COVID-19.⁸ The following table and graph illustrate the number of COVID-19 cases in South Korea.

Table: COVID-19 Cases in South Korea



Source: Ministry of Health and Welfare, Republic of Korea

Table: COVID-19 Cases in South Korea



Source: Worldometer





South Korea's Policy of Controlling COVID-19

Unlike other countries (such as China, Italy, France) that have applied lockdowns, the government of South Korea managed to turn its outbreak around without locking down its cities. The government of South Korea decided to implement four strategies namely tracking, tracing, testing, and treating in order to protect, prevent, and control the spread of COVID-19.⁹ The author classifies South Korea's effective policies on COVID-19 into several sectors including public information, health, and socio-economic sectors.

In the public information sector, the government of South Korea has been open to the public from the very beginning by providing education and information on COVID-19 transparently. For educating people, the government put posters in public areas with information on preventing COVID-19 transmissions such as wearing a mask and washing hands with soap. For informing the public, a press statement related to the COVID-19 cases is delivered to the public periodically, through a single channel and in real time on the television and the website of the Korean Center for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC). Moreover, local governments have also sent text messages to local residents in the event of an emergency warning in the area.¹⁰

The government of South Korea also utilized digital technology through special applications, GPS, CCTV cameras, and track record of credit card transactions, in tracking and tracing to curb the spread of coronavirus. Through a special application, people can access detailed information about the number of patients, the affected areas, the contact history and places that corona patients have visited, and the announcement of an alert warning if they are near COVID-19 infected patients within a 10 km radius so that the people can avoid such locations.¹¹ The openness of the government of South Korea on the information about coronavirus has helped reduce panic in the society as well as increased awareness and civic participation in complying with rules made by the government.

Furthermore, in the health sector, early detection is a preventive action taken by the government of South Korea by testing people on a large scale. The government of South Korea is a pioneer in implementing innovative ways by providing testing centers through 'drive-thru'-clinics and 'K-walk-thru' services. Through 'drive-thru' service, vehicle drivers can visit the testing station and perform the test in a few minutes, then the results will be informed by phone or text message the day after.¹² Whilst, at the 'K-walk-thru' testing station is available in two different booth types such as negative pressure type and positive pressure type. Healthcare professionals will conduct the test for patients in a separate





booth.¹³ Through those methods, the government can collect the samples of COVID-19 quickly, safely, can reduce hospital burdens, and minimize the risk of transmission.

To date, tests have been performed on 538,775 people in South Korea.¹⁴ With the early detection, the number of COVID-19 cases in South Korea initially jumped sharply in a short time because more people were tested positive. However, in this way, the government can map the affected cluster areas, isolate them and treat the infected patients immediately. After testing, the next step is treating patients who are COVID-19-positive. The strategy of South Korea involved categorizing patients by risk (asymptomatic, mild, severe, or critical) and treating them accordingly. Low-risk patients and those that have mild symptoms are placed in a dormitory. Meanwhile, high-risk patients such as the elderly and those that have severe symptoms are treated in special hospitals for COVID-19 patients.¹⁵ To reduce the risk of transmission to medical staff, South Korea adopted a method called the “phone booth”. This saw patients consulting with doctors and nurses by telephone in a separate room.¹⁶ Regarding the cost of examining and treating COVID-19, the government provides free access, especially for people who have symptoms of COVID-19. For the most affected areas of COVID-19, the government of South Korea has not imposed lockdowns but instead implements special care zones such as for Daegu, Cheongdo, and Gyeongsan cities. As a special care zone, the central government delivers additional resources to those areas such as hospital readiness, medical staff (doctors, nurses), and mask supplies.¹⁷

Further, the policy on the socio-economic sector involved South Korea applying social distancing so that people do not gather, and even imposing criminal sanctions and fines for those who refuse tests and self-quarantine. In addition, the government also prohibited holding meetings, tightening the entry of foreigners, closing schools, offices, and business activities (restaurants, cinemas, etc.), and implementing work from home. The closure of these business activities certainly affects the economic condition of South Korea. Realizing this, the government will adopt a new policy to reduce the economic impact of the coronavirus. The economic policy includes providing cash assistance to the community worth up to 1 million won (IDR 13 million) per family (except for 30 percent of the high-income population) and freeing utility bills (water, telephone, internet, gas) for small and middle companies.¹⁸

Analysis/The Verdict

Although the COVID-19 outbreak in South Korea has not yet ended, South Korea’s success in flattening the curve on COVID-19 so far has not only been due to its government policies, but also because of its community involvement. Appropriate and effective policies and strategies from the government





THC INSIGHTS

No. 15 / 21 April 2020
www.habibiecenter.or.id

have increased public trust so that the community would voluntarily work together to comply with government regulations such as doing social distancing, self-quarantine, and being rational in buying basic needs. Indeed, on 15 April 2020, the ruling party won a landslide election on the back of public support for the government's effective response to the coronavirus. The government's swift response and the active involvement from the community can ultimately support the collective actions of the country to overcome the health crisis. It can be a lesson learned and an example for other countries including Indonesia, because through the role of government and society itself, it can not only curb the spread of COVID-19, but also can save the lives of citizens from death.



Endnotes

- 1 Detik.com. (2020, March 3). "Virus Corona di Korea Selatan, Gambaran Ringkas." Detik News. Retrieved from <https://news.detik.com/internasional/d-4922756/virus-corona-di-korea-selatan-gambaran-ringkas?single=1>
- 2 Ministry of Health and Welfare. (2020, April 16). "Coronavirus Disease-19, Republic of Korea." Retrieved from <http://ncov.mohw.go.kr/en/>
- 3 BBC. (2020, March 24). "Virus Corona: Korea Selatan Laporkan Jumlah Kasus Baru Terendah dalam Empat Pekan, Namun Waspada Gelombang Kasus Baru." Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/dunia-52014127>
- 4 Detik.com. (2020, March 3). "Virus Corona di Korea Selatan, Gambaran Ringkas." Detik News. Retrieved from <https://news.detik.com/internasional/d-4922756/virus-corona-di-korea-selatan-gambaran-ringkas?single=1>
- 5 Kasulis, K. (2020, March 19). South Korea's Coronavirus Lessons: Quick, Easy Tests, Monitoring." Al-jazeera. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/south-korea-coronavirus-lessons-quick-easy-tests-monitoring-200319011438619.html>
- 6 BBC. (2020, February 21). "Coronavirus: South Korea Emergency Measures as Infection Increase." Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-51582186>
- 7 Ministry of Health and Welfare. (2020, April 16). "Cases in Korea by City/Province." Retrieved from http://ncov.mohw.go.kr/en/bdBoardList.do?brdId=16&brdGubun=162&dataGubun=&ncvContSeq=&contSeq=&board_id=
- 8 Ministry of Health and Welfare. (2020, April 16). "Coronavirus Disease-19, Republic of Korea." Retrieved from <http://ncov.mohw.go.kr/en/>
- 9 Jo, Eun A. (2020, March 30). "A Democratic Response to Coronavirus: Lessons from South Korea." The Diplomat. Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/a-democratic-response-to-coronavirus-lessons-from-south-korea/>
- 10 Tirto. (2020, March 2). "Pemkot Depok Bisa Tiru Cara Korea Selatan Tangani Wabah Corona." Retrieved from <https://tirto.id/pemkot-depok-bisa-tiru-cara-korea-selatan-tangani-wabah-corona-eCNR>
- 11 CNN Indonesia. (2020, March 13). "Melongok Langkah Agresif Korsel Melawan Virus Corona." Retrieved from <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/internasional/20200313143755-113-483166/melongok-langkah-agresif-korsel-melawan-virus-corona>
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 The Government of Republic of Korea. (2020, April 15). How Korea Responded to a Pandemic Using ICT: Flattening the Curve on Covid-19.
- 14 Ministry of Health and Welfare. (2020, April 16). "Coronavirus Disease-19, Republic of Korea." Retrieved from <http://ncov.mohw.go.kr/en/>
- 15 Jo, Eun A. (2020, March 30). "A Democratic Response to Coronavirus: Lessons from South Korea." The Diplomat. Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/a-democratic-response-to-coronavirus-lessons-from-south-korea/>
- 16 Rich, Timothy S. (2020, March 26). "South Korea: The Politics of Covid-19." The Diplomat. Retrieved from <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/south-korea-the-politics-of-covid-19/>
- 17 Dewi, R. K. (2020, March 20). "Virus Corona, Korea Selatan dan Klaim Penurunan Kasus Covid-19. Kompas. Retrieved from <https://www.kompas.com/tren/read/2020/03/20/172000265/virus-corona-korea-selatan-dan-klaim-penurunan-kasus-covid-19>
- 18 Bramasta, D. B. (2020, March 31). "Virus Corona, Korea Selatan, dan Bantuan Rp. 13 Juta untuk Warganya." Kompas. Retrieved from <https://www.kompas.com/tren/read/2020/03/31/090200765/virus-corona-korea-selatan-dan-bantuan-rp-13-juta-untuk-warganya?page=2>



THC INSIGHTS

THC Insights are timely and policy-relevant analysis of current political, economic and socio-cultural issues affecting Indonesia and the region. The expert observations and recommendations are produced by researchers at The Habibie Center. Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of The Habibie Center.

The Habibie Center was founded by Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie and family in 1999 as an independent, non-government, non-profit organisation. The vision of The Habibie Center is to create a structurally democratic society founded on the morality and integrity of cultural and religious values. The mission of The Habibie Center are first, to establish a structurally and culturally democratic society that recognizes, respects, and promotes human rights by undertaking study and advocacy of issues related to democratization and human rights, and second, to increase the effectiveness of the management of human resources and the spread of technology.

Contact:

The Habibie Center

Jl. Kemang Selatan No. 98, Jakarta 12560

Tel: +62 21 781 7211 | Fax: +62 21 781 7212

Email: thc@habibiecenter.or.id

Website: www.habibiecenter.or.id