Transparency in the Fight against the Coronavirus: The South Korean Example

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South Korea was among the countries that experienced the coronavirus pandemic the earliest. While the novel coronavirus was sweeping Asian countries in January, South Korea became the second country to experience a massive outbreak after China. The first case in the country was identified on January 20, a 35-year-old Chinese woman. February 18 was the start of the great contagion in South Korea. A severe outbreak took off in the country with the 31st case, known as "Patient 31," tested positive and a religious sect called the Shincheonji Church of Jesus located in the fourth largest city Daegu, became the epicenter of the pandemic. Within less than two weeks, the number of cases rose from 30 to 6,000 in the country with its population of 51 million and various countries put travel warnings and restrictions for South Korea one after the other.

The number of cases peaked on February 29, with 909 new cases per day. According to World Health Organization data, the number of people infected in South Korea on March 1 was greater than the sum of all cases around the world excluding China. Only 15 days later, however, with 8,236 cases, the total number of cases in South Korea made up only 13% of cases in all countries excluding China. Exactly one month after the day the contagion reared its head, on March 20, 87 cases and 3 deaths were registered in the country. Two months later, when new cases dropped to single-digit numbers for the first time on April 19, the measures that had been implemented in the country were relaxed and the return to normal life started to accelerate.

As of May 12, 10,936 of the 4,217,974 cases and 258 of the 287,238 deaths in the world are from South Korea. While the worldwide fatality rate is 6.81%, South Korea is among the countries with the lowest fatality rate at about 2.36%.[1] In conclusion, South Korea flattened the curve in a short period of two months and brought the situation under control to such an extent that parliamentary elections were able to be held on the regular date of April 15. Even though it is still too early to say the country has been completely successful in fighting the coronavirus contagion, with the steps it took

and the various strategies it applied, South Korea now constitutes an important example in fighting the pandemic. South Korea handled the process in a planned, rapid manner, and at the same time transparently. In fact, transparency has been one of the secrets of the country's current success. In light of all of these developments, this essay will lay out how South Korea managed the coronavirus pandemic process and the policies it implemented, with a special emphasis on the role of transparency in the country's fight.

The emergency plan relied on five pillars:

Aggressive testing, a transparent information campaign, quarantine of infected individuals, treatment of those in need, and disinfection of contaminated environments.

Within the scope of these five steps, South Korea followed specific methods and took various measures to flatten the curve and slow down the rate of increase of cases.

South Korea's Battle Map Against the Coronavirus

In the year 2015, South Korea was the country with the highest incidence of MERS outside of Middle-Eastern countries. Because of the belated and insufficient intervention of the president at the time, Park Geun-hye, and her cabinet, the epidemic resulted in 186 cases and 38 deaths in the country, while drilling the economy.[2] Drawing lessons from the MERS experience, officials prepared an emergency plan that prescribed the paths to be followed in the event of a potential pandemic. Within the framework of this plan, the administration of the current president Moon Jae-in acted with great speed and prioritized early diagnosis as well as isolation of infected individuals. The emergency plan relied on five pillars: Aggressive testing, a transparent information campaign, quarantine of infected individuals, treatment of those in need, and disinfection of contaminated environments. Within the scope of these five steps, South Korea followed specific methods and took various measures to flatten the curve and slow down the rate of increase of cases.

Fast-track authorization for testing systems

The experience of MERS had taught the South Korean government the importance of early diagnosis and isolation of the infected to prevent the spread. Five years later, today, South Korean officials did not leave matters to chance, and the government swiftly stepped in to ramp up testing capacity in the country as soon as the novel coronavirus broke out in China. President Moon Jae-in directed four private companies to produce test kits. Furthermore, a key reform was made, allowing the government to introduce a fast-track approval to testing systems that cut the bureaucratic one-year approval procedure down to one week. This allowed the developed tests to be immediately utilized and as a result, the country quickly established a system that reached the capacity to test 20,000 people per day.

Aggressive testing

As of today, South Korea has tested 680,890 people out of its population of 51 million. The results are processed by 118 public and private laboratories that work 24/7. Anyone who wishes can get tested whether they are South Korean citizens or foreigners. The tests are free for anyone –including

undocumented immigrants– who has symptoms, who has had contact with an infected person or who has a doctor referral. Additionally, more than 43 drive-through testing centers have been set up all across the country so that people were able to get tested without getting out of their cars. This made access to tests easier and quicker and prevented congestion in hospitals and the spread of the virus.

Trace, test and treat

Lockdowns or restrictions on movement were never among the measures taken by the South Korean government. Travel restrictions were only put in place for China's Hubei Province in early February. Even when case numbers peaked, no city or region was subjected to isolation, including Daegu and the surrounding North Gyeongsang Region, the center of infections with 87% of the nationwide cases. Instead, South Korea's strategy in this process was determined as "trace, test and treat". Officials therefore chose aggressive testing instead of restricting people's mobility. Today, because cases are mostly imported from abroad, the focus of test centers has shifted to airports. Everyone coming in from abroad gets tested for free at the airport. According to test results that come out within 24 hours at the latest, positive cases are taken to hospitals, while negative cases are required to remain under quarantine at the address they declare.

Social distancing

While not resorting to policies that restrict people's mobility, South Korean officials emphasized maintaining social distance and wearing masks as the sole rules to be followed. There were constant campaigns until the end of April to promote maintaining a two-meter social distance. To this end, places of worship, entertainment venues, sport centers and similar, while not shut down, were subjected to strict rules. In order to prevent people from piling up and the virus from spreading in hospitals, a phone line was created that served in seven languages. It was asked of people who suspected they had the coronavirus to call this line before heading to a hospital. They then were visited and tested by health care personnel at their homes, and taken to hospital if necessary.

Mask supervision

Since infected people could spread the virus even without showing symptoms, everyone was requested to wear masks. Mask boxes and hand sanitizers were provided for commuters at bus and subway stations. An advantage enjoyed by South Korea in this case was that a culture of mask wearing had already existed in the country and masks were already being produced. Therefore, adapting to mask use was very rapid and easy.

When the virus peaked at the end of February, masks became hard to find in the country. Fake or usuriously priced masks were sold on the market. However, officials quickly intervened to halt mask exports in early March and required mask producers to report their sales volumes to the government in order to curb price gouging. At the same time, websites were created to provide detailed information on whether masks and filters were fake or not.

The Policy of Transparency

One of the most important pillars of South Korea's emergency plan was transparency. The process was conducted in a fully open and transparent manner from the very beginning. With this framework and the help of its advanced technology, South Korea quickly established a network for informing the public. In addition to the regular daily briefings given by the Ministry of Health, citizens were rapidly and effectively informed by a phone alarm system, coronavirus websites and mobile applications. As a result, along with accurate policies, informed citizens allowed the coronavirus to be brought under control in a short span of time in South Korea.

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Regular briefing

From late February on when the number of cases was at its highest, the Ministry of Health provided briefings twice a day; once at noon and once in the evening. The number of tests performed, the number of cases and deaths, which cities and neighborhoods the cases emerged in, and the numbers of people under treatment, released from treatment and in quarantine were shared with the public in full detail every day. This information was also shared on the website of the Ministry and was constantly updated. Additionally, the policies implemented and the decisions to be taken were shared in the briefings. Citizens were regularly informed, ensuring that they would be prepared for any upcoming changes. At the same time, results from reports prepared on the effectiveness of the measures taken were also announced. Furthermore, places where cases were observed were shared openly, including their names and addresses, and their status was constantly updated. For example, the name and address of a shopping mall that a patient had visited was disclosed, and in the following days, people were regularly informed about the measures taken at the shopping mall in question. In addition to all of these, information on the expenditures made from the supplementary budget within the scope of fighting the coronavirus was shared with citizens in full detail.

Today, even though the situation is mostly under control in South Korea, the Ministry of Health still gives a briefing once every day at noon. Moreover, television channels constantly display informative tickers about the coronavirus and announcements are made to commuters on the subway and buses to inform them.

The phone alarm system

Relying on an emergency law that grants the government the power to access phone records, credit card receipts and other private data in case of a health emergency, the South Korean government

found out details on the movement of cases and track them to ensure they were isolated. When cases multiplied, the Ministry of Health immediately established a phone alarm system. This alarm system uses the location of the person as reference point and sends an alarm to the phone whenever a new case emerges nearby. This alarm message shares details such as where the case emerged, the age and sex of the case, relation with previous cases and whether the case was imported from abroad. These alarms come with a website link. Clicking the link shows the precise movement of the infected person. These details include information such as where the person traveled, on what day and at which hour, which vehicle they used, whether they were symptomatic, whether they met with anyone and whether they wore a mask.

Coronavirus websites

In addition to the constantly updated website of the Ministry of Health, all of the information also gets regularly updated and shared on the city and district municipalities' own websites. Details such as the total number of tests, the number of cases, deaths, recoveries and those under quarantine and hospital occupancy rates are disclosed.

The movements of those whose tests came back positive were comprehensively investigated and steps were taken accordingly. A website was created in January when the number of cases in South Korea was still in the single digits. The movements of the cases were shared over a map on this website. In a similar fashion with the national mobile phone alarm system, patients were tracked in accordance with the emergency law. All of the information related to where infected persons were on what day and at what hour, whom they contacted, which vehicles they used, whether they wore a mask and whether they showed symptoms was published over a map on this website. This allowed people who have been at the same place at the same time as a known case to realize that they were in the risk group. In this way, they were able to isolate themselves and were encouraged to get tested. At the same time, places where infected individuals were present were identified and shared, allowing people to stay away from those high-risk areas.

Coronavirus mobile applications

The South Korean government has developed two smartphone applications. One of these was a smartphone application developed for the purpose of tracking the 14-day quarantine of persons who came to South Korea from abroad. Within the framework of this application, persons coming in from abroad were required to stay contiguously at their stated address and report on their health status twice a day over the period of two weeks. In case of failure to report, they were called by phone or officials went to the stated address to check up on the situation.

Another smartphone application is one designed for public officials, which allows them to check if persons that need to be under quarantine have violated the quarantine or not. With this application, a warning message got sent to officials when a person who needed to be under quarantine left the identified quarantine zone. Quarantine violations are punishable by fines or imprisonment in South Korea.

Conclusion

While the picture in South Korea was scary as of late February, the country brought the situation mostly under control within a short period of two months, reaching single-digit case numbers. The success was such that parliamentary elections on April 15 were able to be held on the normal date, measures were relaxed starting from late April and return to normal life could begin. The process was managed in a rapid, programmatic and transparent fashion with the emergency plan prepared after the MERS experience in 2015. Instead of forms of precautions like lockdowns, travel bans and quarantining cities that restrict mobility, South Korea developed methods to quickly identify infected persons and perform aggressive testing, while constantly informing and educating the public within a framework of transparency. The policies implemented and the decisions to be taken as well as the number of tests performed and the number of cases, deaths, recoveries and quarantined persons were shared with citizens every day in all their details. The information was constantly updated. As a consequence, accurate policies and informed citizens allowed the coronavirus to be brought under control in a short amount of time in South Korea and accelerated the return to normal life.

President Moon Jae-in and his team reaped the rewards of their efforts in fighting the coronavirus in the parliamentary elections on April 15. Moon Jae-in's Democratic Party achieved great success, becoming the party that sent the most representatives to parliament on its own in the history of Korean democracy. Having shared the developments with the people in all their details since the beginning of the process and having repeatedly stated that the crisis was going to be well-managed and brought under control within a short span of time, the government saw the result of the positive atmosphere they created in the country with the highest electoral turnout in the last 28 years.

In conclusion, while its fight against the coronavirus has not yet come to an end, with the various strategies it applied and the transparent process it ran, South Korea has constituted an important example for fighting the pandemic.

Notes

1 Coronavirus Disease-19 Republic of Korea, Ministry of Health and Welfare. http://ncov.mohw.go.kr/en/.

2 The first MERS-coronavirus (MERS-CoV) case was identified in April 2012 in a patient in Saudi Arabia. As of January 2020, there were 2,519 cases and 866 deaths in total around the world due to MERS-CoV, most of which were recorded in the Arabian Peninsula. While Saudi Arabia was the country most affected by the virus with 1,029 cases and 452 deaths, South Korea was the second most affected country with 186 cases and 38 deaths. Meanwhile, 74 cases and 10 deaths were recorded in the United Arab Emirates which came after South Korea. See MERS situation update January 2020, WHO EMRO. http://www.emro.who.int/pandemic-epidemic-diseases/mers-cov/mers-situation-update-january-2020.html.

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