

Opinion – Cambodia’s COVID-19 Success, Economic Fallout and Image Crisis

Written by Kimkong Heng

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Following the outbreak of COVID-19 in late 2019, some countries such as Australia, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam have so far fared better in the fight against the pandemic than many countries such as Italy, Spain, the US and now Brazil which have been severely affected. Other countries such as Singapore have performed well initially and are now trying to handle a second wave of COVID-19. Cambodia confirmed its first case in late January, and by mid-April the total infected cases rose to more than 100. On May 16, Cambodia’s last COVID-19 patient was discharged from hospital; however, new cases were once again reported in late May and thereafter. As of July 14, Cambodia has confirmed a total of 165 cases, 133 of which have recovered. It is worth noting that recently confirmed cases were all imported cases as Cambodians working and studying overseas sought to return to their country.

There have been analyses of why Cambodia appears to be able to cope with COVID-19 relatively well despite its weak healthcare system and limited technical and financial resources. Several reasons are worth mentioning. First and foremost, Cambodia adopted anti-COVID-19 measures quickly and early. Despite initially downplaying the severity of the virus, the country took pre-emptive measures to combat the coronavirus. Cambodia confirmed its first Cambodian COVID-19 patient in Siem Reap province on March 07. Afterwards, the government immediately ordered all schools in that province closed. About a week later all educational institutions at all levels, both public and private, were closed. Schools and universities remain closed, although select schools with the capacity to ensure safety standards can reopen in August.

In addition, the Cambodian authorities ordered all entertainment venues such as casinos, karaoke clubs and bars shut down, even though casinos now can reopen if they meet certain requirements on COVID-19 measures. Other measures which have turned out effective include testing and contact tracing, extensive screening at border checkpoints, temporary suspension of foreign visas, domestic and international travel restrictions, self-quarantine and isolation and the cancellation of important events such as Khmer New Year celebrations. Between late January and early June, Cambodia performed more than 16,000 COVID-19 tests, most of which have been with incoming passengers and garment workers.

There are other factors that deserve a mention. One is to do with the country’s socio-economic development. As about 80% of Cambodia’s population live in the countryside with low population density, the Cambodian government may have found it easier to control the COVID-19 spread and focus more on higher-risk locations including the capital Phnom Penh and other tourist towns such as Siem Reap and Sihanoukville. The fact that many Cambodians are accustomed to wearing face masks in public may also have been helpful. Efforts by the Cambodian Health Ministry through regular press conferences and information sharing on Facebook should as well be acknowledged.

The government’s crackdown on fake news, albeit amidst strong criticism from rights groups, may have played a part in controlling COVID-19 since accurate information rather than misinformation about the virus and how to prevent it has been shared. In addition to this, there is great concern over the passage of the controversial new state of emergency law in April. The law grants the Cambodian government, led by Prime Minister Hun Sen, potential power to restrict civil rights and liberties including freedom of travel, work and assembly and right to privacy in times of

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national emergencies.

It is also important to point out the technical and financial support from development partners and other actors. In times of crisis, there has been strong public support from civil servants and local business elites who have donated to fund Cambodia’s response efforts. The World Health Organisation has provided coordination and technical support, while the World Bank has approved US\$20 million credit. Moreover, there have been medical supplies and funds from various partners such as Australia, China, the EU, France, Germany, Japan, the US and Vietnam.

Despite its relative success in containing COVID-19, Cambodia faces significant economic and foreign policy challenges. The pandemic has badly affected the country’s main GDP growth drivers such as the garment, tourism and construction industries. The number of tourists has flatlined resulting in a reported 99.5% drop in monthly revenue from almost US\$7 million a month in the previous year to just around US\$30,000 in April this year. Around 400 garment factories in Cambodia have suspended their operations, while around 170 companies in the tourism sector has been closed. As to the construction industry, its average growth rate has dropped from roughly 18% prior to the pandemic to just about 5% this year. Cambodia’s GDP growth in 2020 is projected to experience a sharp decline, potentially registering a negative growth rate of between -1% and -2.9% in a worst-case scenario.

On the foreign policy front, despite its efforts, Cambodia faces an image crisis. The country has been fiercely criticised for its increasing alignment with China. In 2012, Cambodia came under harsh criticism when it was an ASEAN chair as the grouping failed to reach a consensus regarding Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea. In 2017, Cambodia was criticised as it was seen to be heading towards becoming a one-party state after the country’s main opposition party was dissolved by the Supreme Court – a move prompting the EU to partially suspend Cambodia’s trade benefits. In 2019, the World Street Journal reported that Cambodia and China had signed a secret deal to allow Beijing military access to one of Cambodia’s naval bases. The speculations that Phnom Penh is helping Beijing to realise its “string of pearls” ambitions have greatly undermined Cambodia’s image in the regional and international arena.

Overall, while Cambodia has so far successfully contained the spread of COVID-19, the country faces ongoing challenges regarding economic fallout and image crisis. Moving forward, Cambodia must continue to combat COVID-19, reverse its democratic drift, restore and improve ties with the US and its allies and step up its foreign policy ambitions.

About the author:

Kimkong Heng is a PhD candidate at the University of Queensland. Prior to this, he was a lecturer and an assistant dean of the School of Graduate Studies, the University of Cambodia. He is also a Visiting Senior Fellow at the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace and a founding co-editor of Cambodian Education Forum.