

South Asia Centre Meeting
21 April 2020

Summary of Discussions

South Asia Centre at MP-IDSA held its weekly meeting on 21 April 2020, which was attended by Dr Smruti S Pattanaik, Ms Sumita Kumar, Dr Anand Kumar, Dr Nihar Nayak, Dr Priyanka Singh, Dr Gulbin Sultana, Dr Yaqoob ul Hasan, Dr Mir Ahmed Nazir, Dr Mohammad Eisa, Dr Zainab Akhter, Dr Paulami Sanyal, Saurabh Singh and Dr Ashok Behuria. Dr Uday Bhanu Singh, Coordinator of the South East Asian Centre participated in the discussions. Important developments discussed today are given, country-wise, below.

Bangladesh

Covid-19 cases have increased in Bangladesh; over 3400 people have tested positive for Corona Virus and the country has so far registered 110 deaths. The government is distributing relief among the poor who are not able to sustain themselves.

There is an accusation that the relief material, which is meant for the poor, is being stolen by those who are in charge of distributing relief and most of them are politicians and local leaders belonging to the ruling party. The BNP General Secretary, Mirza Fakhru Alamgir, was not only critical of government's relief distribution but he also said that Bangladesh has more thieves than Covid-19 patients. Two online newspapers, the BDnews24.com and Jago news reported pilferage of relief material. Rather than investigating into such allegations, the government, clearly dismissive of these charges, has filed cases against the editors of these two portals under the Digital Security Act for spreading misinformation.

Many in the civil society are also critical of the government's non-serious approach to testing because they strongly feel that low testing could result in the spread of infection.

The garment workers, worst hit by the lockdown and constituting overwhelming percentage (almost 90 per cent) of the informal workforce, demonstrated against the non-payment of their wages. The gathering of garment workers led to fear of community-spread of Covid-19. Two areas where most of the garment workers stay are Gazipur and Narayanganj, which have emerged as Covid-19 hotspots. The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers & Exporters Association (BGMEA) clarified that it had instructed all the garment factories to clear the wages, yet, the workers complained of non-payment. As a measure of governmental response, the Bangladesh Bank issued a directive saying that those industries who do not clear the wage would not qualify to receive incentive from the government to overcome their financial difficulties.

In addition to the garment workers losing their jobs, the trained workforce who were supposed to join their employers abroad are stuck in Bangladesh due to cancellation of flights. Moreover, there is a rethink among the employers abroad about accommodating labour from abroad in the face of Covid-19 induced lockdowns in most of the countries around the world. The UAE, for example, has already asked the government to take back Bangladeshi workers, including Rohingyas working there on Bangladeshi passports, employed in that country due to closure of businesses. The inevitable return of expatriate labourers is likely to create a major economic challenge for the country which depends a lot on remittance as a major source of its revenue.

Bangladesh health care system is also facing a major problem. Beds in the hospital are inadequate to accommodate patient. Only 1,267 ventilators are available for the whole country. There are about 434 hospitals equipped to handle Covid-19 out of which only 110 are outside Dhaka. Social distancing is a major problem. This was evident from the fact that 100,000 people flocked to the *namaz-e-janaza* of Maulana Jubayer Ahmed Ansari, a senior *nayeb-e-ameer* of Bangladesh Khelafat Majlish.

Bangladesh has sought assistance of \$1 billion from Asian Development Bank (ADB) for budgetary support and additional \$500 million as relief. AIIB has announced Tk1450 crore as relief for Bangladesh.

Pakistan

In Pakistan, the government has decided to open the mosques for congregational prayers during the holy month of Ramazan and trying to the best of a bad decision by organising a consultative meeting between religious scholars and President Arif Alvi. The meeting yielded a 20-point Standard Operation Procedure (SOP), which was finally approved by the Ulema who agreed to undertake preventive measures against the virus during the prayers.

Dr Alvi has tweeted later, *"In my discussions with Ulema for ensuring 20 point SOPs for Taraveeh, I had a talk with Mufti Muhammad Naeem of Jamia Binoria in Karachi yesterday. He informed me that he had sent an Arabic translation of our 'Ijma' of 20 points to Saudi Arabia. Ulema & Citizens must take lead"*. Mosques committees have been asked to form congregational rows by maintaining a distance of six feet between them and underlined that people above age of 50 would not be allowed in the mosque during these prayers.

It is being argued in Pakistan that keeping physical distance while praying would not be possible, and questions are being asked as to who will ensure observance of these SOPs and safety of people in mosques, as it is not the responsibility of the Ulema but that of the elected government, which has failed miserably to enforce its orders so far. Additionally, some would also argue that the opening up of small-

scale industries and other sectors, which might have been very reasonable for the government to do, might have given the Ulema an alibi to pressurise the government to agree to opening up of the Mosques.

The government has decided to conduct classes for the seminary students using the PTV. The government has also decided to celebrate this coming Friday (24 April) as *Youm-e-Tauba* and *Yum-e-Rehmat*, asking forgiveness and blessing from God to save the country from Covid-19.

The IMF has come out with its report on Pakistan which states that Pakistan will miss its fiscal targets due to Covid-19 crisis. The budget deficit is going to be PKR 4 trillion, up from Rs 3.2 trillion, projected earlier.

Gilgit Baltistan (GB)

It is reported by the local media that Pakistan Election Act 2017 may be implemented in Gilgit Baltistan and GB Assembly 2020 elections would be held on or before 24 September 2020. Gilgit Baltistan Assembly term will end in 24 June 2020 and elections need to be held within 90 days after dissolution of Current Assembly.

The Elections Act 2017 defines the functions and limitations of caretaker governments and establishes the contours of action these interim governments can and cannot take, restricting them from taking any major policy decisions. In addition, the Act sets out a legally binding timeline for the conduct of local elections, which must now be held within 120 days after local councils either complete their tenure or are dissolved.

It is also reported that so far only 16000 people from GB have been included in the *Ehsas* Programme. Interestingly, the current GB Chief Minister, who is from PML-Nawaz and opposed to PTI, which is leading the ruling alliance at the centre, has refused to distribute ration through Tiger Force formed by Imran Khan to fight Covid-19.

Sri Lanka

The emergency situation arising out of measures taken by the Lankan government to stop the spread of the Covid-19 has had an interesting political fall-out in the country. It could even lead to a constitutional crisis.

Election Commission of Sri Lanka has announced the date for Parliamentary elections on 20 June 2020 invoking Parliament Elections Act (No. 1 of 1981) - Section 24 (3), which says "Where due to any emergency or unforeseen circumstances the poll for the election in any electoral district cannot be taken on the day specified in the notice relating to the election published under subsection (1), the Commissioner may, by Order published in the Gazette, appoint another day for the taking of such poll, and such other day shall not be earlier than the fourteenth day after the publication of the Order in the Gazette".

Many experts in Sri Lanka are of the view that the date announced by the commission may lead the country towards a constitutional crisis. The parliament was dissolved on 2 March and initially the date for elections was to be held on 25 April. As per the Art 70 of the present Constitution, the elections need to be held with 90 days of the dissolution of the parliament and the new parliament should meet on 2 June 2020.

In this context, President is being urged to approach the Supreme Court, which he had refused earlier, when Election commissioner had advised him to do so. However, there are many in Sri Lanka who believe that given the Covid-19 situation in the country, election should be postponed even further if there is a requirement.

In the meantime, the caretaker executive council may be set up to run the affairs of the government. This proposal has been opposed by many experts arguing that the caretaker arrangement will lead the country towards dictatorship.

Citing the example of South Korea, many others believe that Sri Lanka too can conduct the elections as the number of deaths due to Covid-19 in Sri Lanka is much less than that of Korea. Nonetheless, people opposing the election at this point argue that Sri Lanka is not as well-equipped and capable as South Korea to take precautionary measures during the elections. Given the emerging debate it remains to be seen as to how the government would react to the date of Parliamentary elections announced by the election commission in the coming days.

Maldives

COVID 19 cases in Maldives rose to 82. Community spread has started in the Maldives.

There was media report of suspected terrorist attack in Maldives. As per the report Maldivian authority is investigating on the suspicion. However, no such media report on the issue was published in Sri Lankan media.

Nepal

Even amid the anxieties driving the government's response to Covid-19 situation in Nepal, the KP Sharma Oli Cabinet introduced two ordinances— both unrelated to the ongoing fight against Covid-19—which has kicked up a political controversy in the country.

The first ordinance amends an existing provision in the Political Parties Act that currently requires 40 percent support from both the party central committee and the parliamentary party for a political split. After the amendment, a split vote will only require 40 percent support from either the central committee or the parliamentary party. This ordinance, critics believe, would make it easier for leaders to split political parties, if they wanted to.

It is being reported that there is no consensus within the ruling party on the provisions of this particular ordinance. It is being said that The day the two ordinances were promulgated, Prachanda, the party tried to stop the promulgation by hastily calling the party's Secretariat meeting but he failed, as ordinances were promulgated by the president on the recommendation of the Council of Ministers while party leaders were discussing them at the Secretariat meeting.

Analysts believe, Oli is aware of the differences between his camp and that of Prachanda within the party and therefore coming out with a proviso that would make it easier on his part to break away from the united communist party or at least keep that threat alive in case he would face any conspiracy within the party to topple him.

The other ordinance related to the Constitutional Council seeks to amend provisions allowing the body to take decisions even in the absence of the leader of the opposition, even if the Speaker is from a different party. This is basically aimed at dispensing with the tradition of emphasis on political consensus. and restoring majoritarian reflex in the functioning of the government.

This has done criticisms from all quarters. The main argument from opposition has been that such a step has been taken by the government without proper consultations at a time when the country is fighting a global pandemic. Main opposition party Nepali Congress has labelled the government's step as problematic and an irresponsible one.

Covid-19 situation

A worrying rise in Islamophobia has appeared in Nepal especially since a number of Muslim men were diagnosed with Covid-19. Speculation that Muslims are knowingly spreading Covid-19 has begun to spread, aided and abetted by social media and some online news portals. There are 31 positive cases reported in Nepal so far. Of that, 14 are from India. There are reports about mob attacks on Mosques- Sunsari, Itahari, Udaypur, after 12 positive cases were found in the Udaypur district. Almost all the mosques in Nepal have been sealed.

It is reported that Tibetan medicine, similar in some ways to Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), is being introduced as a solution for Covid-19 by Chinese medical experts in Nepal via an online conference as part of China's efforts to help Nepal tackle the global pandemic.

Since the outbreak, the Beijing Hospital of Tibetan Medicine has donated "Nine-flavor epidemic prevention powder" sachets to Nepal and other Belt and Road (BRI) countries, according to Feng Xin, deputy director of the Department of Medical Affairs at the Beijing Hospital of Tibetan Medicine.

Major infrastructure projects have been halted due to shortage of material, labourers and instruments. National lockdown has severely affected supply chain in Nepal. The consumer price inflation stood at 6.7 per cent in mid-March compared to 4.2 per cent a year ago.

Bhutan

Bhutan has the lowest number of just 6 cases with no casualty so far. There is some anxiety about Bhutanese returning from outside and the government is taking measures for isolation of these returnees before sending them home.

About 2,604 Bhutanese from 25 countries have returned since March. However, a majority of them are students. Another 2,000 Bhutanese will be returning between April 18 and 28, which will include both students and working overseas. 140 Bhutanese, including a minor, returned from Kuwait on April 20. They will be quarantined in Paro. More Bhutanese from Qatar will be arriving on April 21.

The King has ordered the government to look into creating job opportunities for Bhutanese working overseas and has returned home in the wake of the Covid- 19 pandemic.

