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## Human Security in Thailand during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and its prevention threatens human security globally. In Thailand, COVID-19 threatens all dimensions of human security, along with the political polarization and hundreds of political demonstrations. From that moment the Thai Government has used Emergency Decrees to centralize epidemic control it seemed that it had succeeded in promoting health security by controlling the movement of newly infected people while also dealing with counter-government protests in the first phase of the pandemic. However, evidence from the impact of that governance policy for COVID-19 prevention shows that the threat to security is still dominating community responses. A recent report revealed the failure of the '*Top-Down*' method of pandemic control and impact mitigation. From underestimation to overreaction in policy frameworks, it is not only the COVID-19 pandemic but also inappropriate Government policy that has caused downside risks in terms of economic imbalance, food, and health security. The most vulnerable people in this situation are the informal labor force without social security in the tourism and service supply chain, and those people who have lagged behind the digital disruption of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The government has aggravated social inequality among poor and older people who have low technological ability by the imposition of a state-centric socio-economic recovery program and the digitalization of financial aid.

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## 1. Introduction

Human Security is an international concept, first introduced by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the *Human Development Report 1994*, and later in *Human Security Now* in 2003. By definition, human security refers to *freedom from want* and *freedom from fear*, and *freedom to live with dignity*. Instead of being state-centric as in national security, human security is people-centric, multi-dimensional and interconnected. In other words, the concept of human security is a way to redefine security centered on people instead of the state or nation. The idea has been disseminated for more than a decade; however, the concept of human security is still inferior to other concepts like national security and human rights. Even in a country that established a Ministry of Social Development and Human Security earlier than others though, like Thailand, this does not mean that human security has been highlighted instead of national security, even in human trafficking-related issues (Jumnianpol, Nuangjamnong and Srakaew 2019).

From late 2019, all human beings in the world have been threatened by the COVID-19 pandemic and the policies for its prevention. In term of human security, the COVID-19 itself threatens the idea of *freedom from fear* in new sense, it is more than disaster and other threats, but the pandemic impact makes people afraid of other people, including their family and friends. At the same time, the socio-economic impact that has resulted from strict prevention measures, i.e., lockdown and social distancing also intensifies the poverty, or *want* of the people. Since the COVID-19 outbreak is a direct threat to the human community, which the 'old security' concept could not capture, the new human security lens can best reveal the challenging situation. In term of human security, this report aims to identify who are the most vulnerable in the COVID-19 outbreak to find a way to empower them in the future. This is a Level-1 report intended to elaborate on the situation of human security in Thailand during the COVID-19 crisis.

In Thailand, in the first period, it seemed that the government had succeeded in promoting health security by controlling the activities of newly infected people. However, the outcome highly affected other dimensions of human security, especially economic and social impact. The tourism and service sector, including its supply chain as the primary financial sector that drives the country, is the most affected by the country's lockdown.

This report is organized into four parts. The following section presents the current context about human security in Thailand, amidst the protracted political conflict after the last coup d'état in 2014 that framed national security as a supreme concept. The second part highlights the COVID-19 pandemic as a threat to human security in the country. The third part emphasizes the government response to the COVID-19 to prevent, remedy, and restore the social and economic situation. The last section is a preliminary observation on the second phase plan.

## **2. Human Security Amidst Thailand Political Conflict**

Thailand was stuck with political polarization before the coup d'état in 2006, in two opposition groups. One side was the conservative-royalist group, or the *yellow shirts*. The Yellow shirts engaged in political demonstrations in the name of People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD). On other side were the *red shirts*, who questioned and countered the 2006-coup d'état. Although the coup tried to repress the conflict, the violence exploded again in 2009-2010, with more than 90 people dying. The second round of fighting restarted in 2013 with the contradictory amnesty bill proposed by the Yingluck cabinet. In this round, the Democrat (yellow shirts) - opposition party and its network were the primary player; they organized a large assembly to block government action in the name of the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC). The PDRC organized a 'Bangkok Shutdown' in 2014, the most prolonged demonstration. During this event, there were also clashes between both groups. Among many attempts for conflict resolution, the 2014 coup, the second coup d'état within eight years, suppressed the conflict temporarily.

After that, the military junta governed Thailand for many years; with a new constitution and a general election in 2019, the current prime minister of Thailand is the former junta leader. During the military junta period, human rights and freedoms were suppressed. However, there were many movements against the coup, and many political activists were arrested. After the general election, a new political party, namely the 'Future Forward Party (FFP),' of which the party leader, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit is a prominent anti-coup leader and very popular among the youth and new generation, secured more than 80 seats in the parliament. But although he got the vote, he has not been authorized in the parliament; the Constitution Court disqualified him as a MP because of his media company shareholding. Moreover, the FFP was dissolved by the constitutional court in February 2020.

The dissolution of the FFP became the trigger of a new round of protests led by the students and youth. In the early days of 2020, many flash mobs against the government nationwide started from the '*Running against Dictatorship*' movement then spread to university and high-school students in many provinces. In this situation the '*White Ribbon*' movement was very popular as a government symbolic counter. During that time, the COVID-19 virus had slowly spread from Wu Han and had entered Thailand quietly in January 2020. The government, especially the departments responsible for the public health and tourism sectors, were closely monitoring the situation; the only impact at that time was the decreasing number of Chinese tourists for tourism-related business. Finally, when the number of newly-infected increased to over 100-cases daily, the government decided to declare an emergency situation under the Emergency Decree on Public Administration in Emergency Situation B.E.2548 (2005) in all areas of the Kingdom to “...*monitoring and control of the outbreak, the prevention, and treatment of disease...*” (Ratchakitchanubeksa [Government Gazette] 2020), which started from March 26, 2020. The regulation under the emergency decree resulted in increased control and temporary closures and finally to a country lockdown. Many 'places at risk of infection' like, i.e., sport stadiums,

playgrounds in all provinces, restaurants, pubs, all places of entertainment in Bangkok Metropolitan and five vicinity provinces, and the closure of international territory, a 4 pm – 5 am curfew, including prohibition of assembly in all activities that certainly included political demonstrations. As a result, the student movements temporarily stopped because of the COVID-19 pandemic in late March 2020 and only restarted after the third phase of lockdown was relaxed in the second half of 2020.

Currently, there are continuing demonstrations against the government. The protestors have three core agendas:

1. Dissolution of the parliament;
2. Drafting of a new constitution with the removal of the military-assigned senators;
3. Stopping government harassment and intimidation of the people.

The agenda then escalated to the reformation of the monarchy. The government retaliated against the protesters fiercely; in addition to breaking up demonstrations, the youth activists have been reported as violating the *Lese Majeste* law, the emergency decrees, and the disease control act; and some of them have been arrested without bail. This situation reflected the politics of the COVID-19 emergency. The decree has not been only used to control the COVID-19 situation but that control also includes political demonstrations. Regarding the human security situation, this is seen to be parallel with the grievances caused by COVID-19; many Thai people are living in fear of government action in the political arena (for a better understanding of this point, see the timeline in Figure 1).

### **3. COVID-19 and its Impact on Thailand's Human Security**

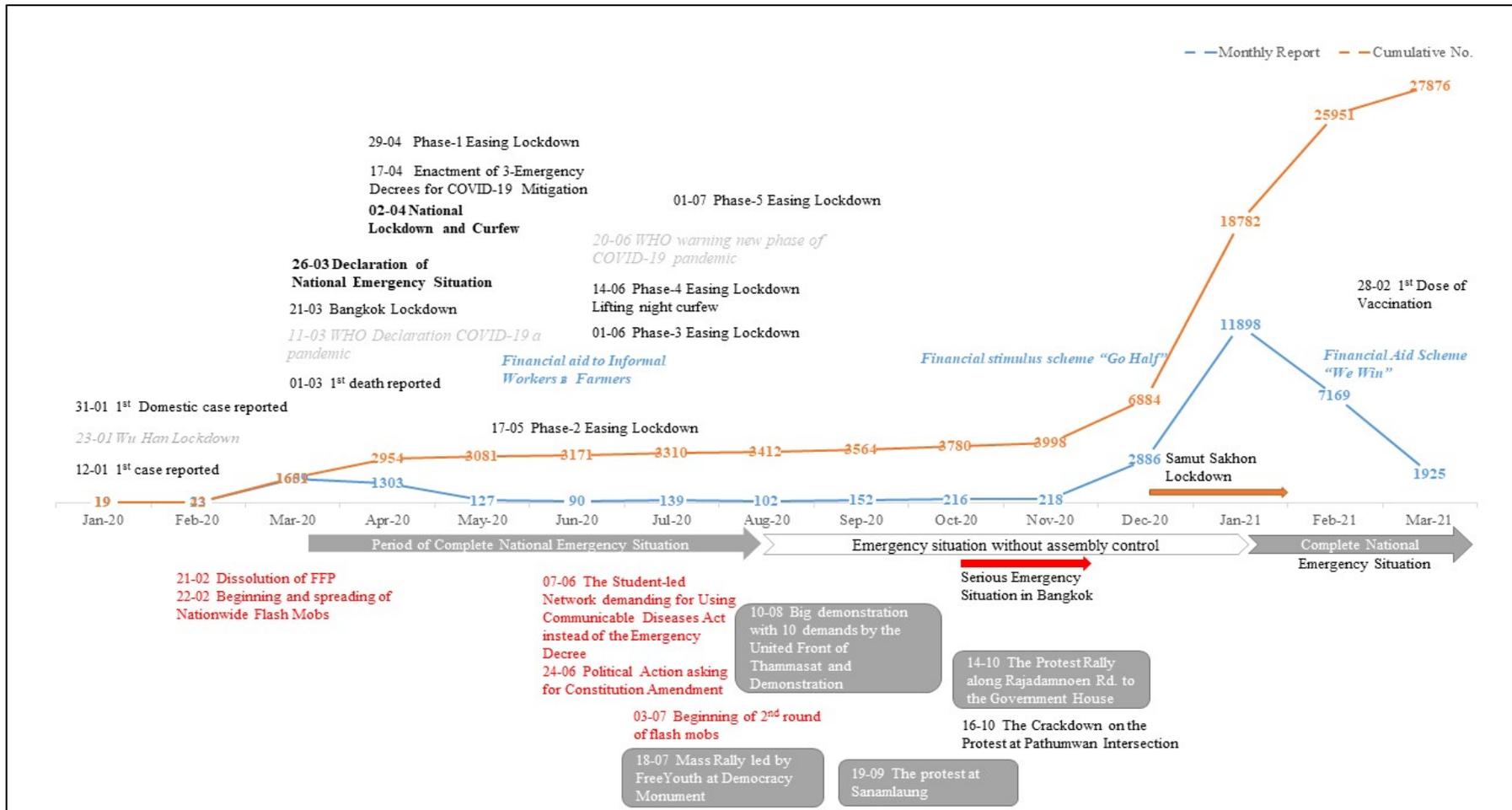
As mentioned in the previous section, the COVID-19 entered Thailand amidst political conflict; therefore, it is parallel with the '*fear*' generated by the political confrontation, the Thai people

struggle with the *'fear'* and *'want'* that resulted from the virus and the ways by which the government decided to control the pandemic. In terms of human security, the COVID-19 is a direct threat to the *economic and health security* of the people. In a country highly dependent on the service sector like Thailand, after the first phase of the epidemic in Wu Han, the first observable effect in Thailand was an immediate decrease in the number of tourists (-42.74% in February and then -76.44% in March 2020). As a result, the popular destinations for Chinese tourists like Chiang Mai have become quiet as never before. The lower number of tourists resulted in lower incomes, as shown by the report by the Ministry of Tourism and Sports (MOTS). Tourism income started falling (-39.98% in February and -76.04% in March), before stabilizing at 0 in April 2020 (MOTS 2021). Therefore, all the players in the supply chain of tourism became the first line of facing the epidemic's effects, ranging from airlines, guides, local transports, hotels, restaurants to street vendors. If the declining number of tourists signified the downfall of the tourism supply chain, the lockdown in the following month would see the collapse of all service sectors.

The partial lockdown created by the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority (BMA) announcement<sup>1</sup> on March 21, 2020, showed that the COVID-19 had affected the whole country. The essential lockdown measures were closing all public spaces in Bangkok, including schools, universities, department store, all government and business buildings, including the restaurants. As soon as the BMA declaration was made, millions of the [domestic migrant] workers returned to their hometown, and the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) feared that their trips would exacerbate the virus' spread over the whole country (Bangkok Post 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> Actually, the first area lockdown was in the Buriram district and Uthai Thani on March 16, but it is not usually mentioned because it had a lower effect.



**Figure 1. Timeline of Political Conflict and COVID-19 related Measures in Thailand**  
 Source: Daily Statistics of Thailand COVID-19 situation as of March 22 2021 (Digital Government Agency 2021).

A few days later the lockdown was expanded again nationwide, after the Declaration of an Emergency Situation throughout the country on March 25 2020. In this situation, the *Emergency Decree on Public Administration in Emergency Situation B.E.2548 (2005)* became the primary tool through which the government could centralize all resources and control the freedom of the citizens, including freedom of assembly, in the name of epidemic control. It was not only an area lockdown; finally, the Thai government had announced a national curfew on April 2 2020. This curfew prohibited people from leaving their residences between 10 pm and 4 am, except for the transport of goods, fuel, medicine, medical supplies, and the movement of patients and medical personnel. However, in the early period of the curfew, it was noticeable that the police seemed to overuse the power; hundreds of people were prosecuted for curfew violation, including medical staff. The downside risk caused by COVID-19 on the critical dimensions of human security, economic, food and health security and environmental security are seen in this situation and will now be discussed.

### **3.1 Economic Security**

In terms of *economic security*, viewed from the macroeconomic aspect the World Bank reported in the first decade of 2020 that the COVID-19 has worsened Thailand's economic vulnerability, which has been previously affected by the drought and the delay in the FY 2020 budget. Moreover, because of its export and tourism-dependence, the economic impact has been severe (The World Bank 2020). GDP in the first quarter of 2020 dropped by 1.8% and remarkably declined by 12.2% in the second quarter due to the prevention and control of the spread of COVID-19 measures. The service sectors, namely accommodation and food service activities, wholesale and retail trade, repairing of motor vehicles and motorcycles, transportation and storage, entertainment, and recreation, are the most affected (NESDC 2020a, 2020b). The World Bank concluded that this economic stagnation had resulted directly in a higher unemployment rate: more than 170,000 people in the formal sector lost their jobs. In turn, the lower income from labor affected household

welfare, especially for those people who already had a degree of economic insecurity (The World Bank 2020).

The most vulnerable group in the first period of the COVID-19 pandemic was the labor market in the tourism and service supply chain. Most of these jobs were in the informal labor sector. They were without social welfare support except for universal coverage healthcare. The Senate Standing Committee on Labor also revealed a study of the impact of COVID-19 on the Thai labor market. Using ILO and NESDC information, they identified 8.77 million affected laborers, of which 6.7 million or 76% worked in the service and tourism sector. Divided by type of employment, there were negative impacts on both formal and informal labor. When the formal employee becomes unemployed, leave without pay, reduced working hours, and early retirement become considerations, when informal labor is also laid off, they must endure lockdown without any social welfare (Senate Standing Committee on Labour 2021). Currently, the current proportion of informal labor in Thailand is 53.8% of an overall 37.9 million (National Statistical Office, Ministry of Digital Economy and Society 2020). More than 60% of families in the agricultural sector also have their members working in non-agricultural sectors like tourism that experience the chain-effect of COVID-19 through the decrease family income (Research Unit on Contemporary Peasant Studies 2020). Consequently, the impact on labor has resulted in lower income and therefore an increase in the economic insecurity of most households.

### **3.2 Food Security**

*Food security* is the concept that guarantees accessibility to sufficient and safe food for all people. During the COVID-19 period, the vulnerable group in terms of food security are those urban residents whose food consumption relies on local food markets due to the temporary interruption of logistics under lockdown. Despite the Oxford Policy Management report that food security has not seemed to be problematic in the short-term (Oxford Policy Management 2020), there were

reports about the shortage and higher price of chicken eggs. As a result, the government decided to control the chicken egg market by price control and banning exports (Bangprapa 2020). Nevertheless, while the urban poor and the homeless food situation became fragile, there were food donations by wealthier people and charitable groups, but in the early period these were interrupted by a few government officers because of emergency decree violations (Post Reporter 2020). Finally, the government has controlled food donation through social distancing. On the other hand, the people created a new way for food donation in the community with the concept of 'the pantry of sharing.' Food security initiatives may thus reflect the state of 'top-down threat' and 'bottom-up protection.'

Compared with the urban residents, only 13.9 % of the small farmer respondents in the rural areas reported that their food security was compromised; most of them felt no impact. The primary reason was they could access food from their farm, exchange within community/networks, and buy from the community market and local [mobile] food vendors that were available (Research Unit on Contemporary Peasant Studies 2020).

### **3.3 Health Security**

Before the second round of epidemic exploded at Samut Sakhon in December 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) commended Thailand as '*an excellent example that with a whole-of-government, whole of society, comprehensive approach, this virus can be contained even without a vaccine* (WHO 2020).' This was said to be with its solid health system and a million village health volunteers who could help in prevention and monitoring in all areas. During the epidemic, stopping the COVID-19 was prioritized in the health and government system; all resources were reserved for COVID-19, especially medical services. In this situation, the vulnerable families reported their difficulty accessing hospitals for other reasons during the lockdown, namely the health risk caused by public transportation during their trip to the hospital, the increasing cost in

transportation, and most importantly the closing of medical services now reserved for COVID-19 cases (TDRI 2020). For older people, who are most vulnerable in physical health, UNFPA showed that one-fifth reported a lower level of health during COVID time. The psychological health impact also mattered; an increase of anxiety among elderly caused by lower remittances from their family members. Some poor older lived only on the THB 600-800 Old Age Allowance (OAA) monthly. Some felt more isolated because their families could not visit them (UNFPA and CPS 2020). Interestingly, in terms of area differentiation, the older people in urban areas seemed to have more effect in all dimensions than those in rural areas (see the detail of psychological impact for the elderly in Table 1).

**Table 1. Psychological Symptoms reported by the older people during COVID-19 situation**

	Total	Age group			Gender		Area of residence	
		60-69	70-79	80+	Men	Women	Urban	Rural
Loss of appetite	47.3	46.3	47.1	53.1	45.8	48.5	59.1	38.8
No hope in life	16.4	17.3	15.7	14.3	16.6	16.3	21.4	12.8
Unhappy	23.3	25.0	22.3	17.0	21.2	24.9	29.9	18.4
Sad	17.9	18.8	17.6	14.3	17.7	18.0	23.7	13.6
Worried	57.2	62.8	54.0	38.8	51.6	61.7	65.4	51.3
Lonely	25.0	24.3	26.9	23.8	23.9	26.0	34.4	18.3
Any symptom	24.3	24.5	25.3	21.1	24.1	24.5	29.2	17.6

*Source:* UNFPA and CPS, 2020.

### 3.4 Environmental Security

Generally, when referring to environmental security most authors are concerned about the human threat from natural resource degradation, natural and man-made disasters, and pollution. Before

the COVID-19 outbreak, Thailand, especially the Greater Bangkok Area and Chiang Mai was faced with heavy air pollution—PM 2.5 and haze. In the worst situation, all people had to wear face masks, and all schools and universities in Bangkok had to close often. During those times, the government focused on air pollution as a national agenda (National News Bureau of Thailand 2019). After the first lockdown, optimistically, it was reported that the environmental quality was better in all senses (Pollution Control Department 2021), because economic activities and transportation were stopped temporarily. On the other side, a negative side-effect was reported - the vast increase of single-use, plastic and un-hygienic waste products was inevitable. The BMA reported that when there was more food delivery (to homes during the pandemic lockdowns), the higher was the generation of single-use plastic waste in Bangkok; increasing by 7.5% in one month (Bangkokbiznews 2021). To zoom into the household level, the critical environmental threat was more damaging than the COVID-19 itself. However, since the new types of COVID-19 are easily transmitted, the quarantine of infected people turned this situation into a major difficulty. Poor people do not only live in bad and over-crowded environments, when one family member is infected and cannot be admitted to a hospital, the situation is also worsened by other family members becoming infected.

### **3.5 Most Vulnerable People in COVID-19 period**

The COVID-19 epidemic affected all people. As mentioned earlier, for a tourist-hub and service-based economy like Thailand, the collapse of those sectors caused chain effects in related sectors. Lekfuangfu et al (2020) studied the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown through the lens of supply-side effects and argued that the lockdown affected supplies and lowered the demand. The lockdown had a direct impact on at least 6.4 million workers, significantly in the lower income groups. In this sense, the COVID-19 has worsened the state of income inequality in Thailand (Lekfuangfu, et al. 2020). The most impacted were the labor force related with tourism and service sectors, most of these are *informal labor*, and as noted earlier apart from the universal health

coverage scheme they don't have any other social security.

Currently, Thailand is an aging society with 12 million people, or 19.2% aged over 60 years and will enter a super-aged society in the next ten years. In terms of the health impact of this situation, *the older people* especially those who have chronic diseases are at the most risk. Moreover, as mentioned in Table 1, older people in urban areas are more psychologically affected than those in the rural areas, in this sense, they have become the most vulnerable group. It is not only the senior people themselves; their families are also vulnerable in this sense. From April 23 – May 18, 2020, the Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI), the prominent think tank of Thailand, held two on-line surveys on the social impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable people (75,683 respondents). The report defined the vulnerable as a household with children, elderly, in-bed, and patients with chronic disease. The first round of surveys during 13-27 April focused on social impact; it found that the epidemic and the government prevention measures had affected more than 80% of the vulnerable households in terms of less access to medical services and the closing of nurseries and schools, plus obstacles to access on-line learning for students. The report showed that at least 36.3 – 46.2% of the vulnerable households lost half of their income because family members in other sectors lost their jobs in addition to the above impacts (Lertnitas and Jitsuchon 2020).

#### **4. The Thai Government Operation for the Mitigation of the Impact of COVID-19**

During the COVID-19 pandemic and the declaration of the emergency situation, it was not only the centralization and broader power of the Royal Thai Government (RTG) that was important. The government also politicized and exploited the state of emergency in many other ways. Underestimating the situation on finding the first case in January 2020, Anutin Charnvirakul, the Minister of Public Health, said, ‘...it's [COVID-19] just a type of flu. I see it as a flu ...what we do when we see someone with the flu, we do that, just the same...’ (Teeranai Charuvastra 2020).

This quotation reflects the perception of the government representatives and the then irresponsible response. The impact of this was evidenced by the shortage of hygienic supplies and consumer goods like face masks, alcohol gel, and chicken eggs.

When the newly infected rapidly increased to be more than 100 daily cases in late March, the response became *overreaction* through the declaration of an Emergency Situation with the Emergency Decree, and finally resulted in lockdown and curfew. In this situation, apart from medical professionals, the national security sector also became superior. It should be noticed however that the Prime Minister is the director of the Centre for COVID-19 Situation Administration (CCSA) as the central response authority. Still, the general secretary of the national council is the head of the central coordination office, and he becomes the chair of the ad-hoc committee, responsible for the relaxation of lockdown restriction later (The Prime Minister Order No. 22/2563 2020). This kind of governance structure implies that in the policy framing of the RTG COVID-19 is seen as a threat to national security.

After that, there was much evidence of the abuse of the emergency to control anti-government demonstrations. While the emergency decree seems to be most efficient to control the ordinary people, including the protests, on the other hand it failed to control the epidemic itself. This is shown by the expansion of epidemic clusters, from ‘Lumpini boxing stadium’ as the first cluster in early March 2020, then ‘Samut Sakhon Cluster’ as the illegal migrant worker hub, the ‘Rayong Gambling Cluster’ in December, and to the ‘Thong Lor’ executive club as the latest cluster in early April 2021, currently the cumulative number of the infected is 39,038 cases, with more than 1,000 new cases being added daily.

Regarding the mitigation of the COVID-19 impact, in April 2020, the RTG launched three financial emergency decrees that authorized a total of THB1.9 billion as loans for solving the

problem. This report focuses on the *Emergency Decree Authorizing the Ministry of Finance to Raise Loans to Solve Problems, Remedy and Restore the Economic and Society as Affected by the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic*, B.E. 2563 (2020), as the primary resource for social and economic restoration. The decree allowed one billion Baht as public loans, allocated to three action plans, of which (Scheme-A) allocated 4.5 percent for the medical and public health plan, (Scheme-B) 55.5% as financial aid for people affected from COVID-19, and (Scheme-C) 40% for the social and economic restoration plan. However, after the partial lockdown in December, the cabinet decided to re-allocate the budget to help more affected people<sup>2</sup>.

On March 22, 2021, it found that apart from direct financial aid for the affected people in Scheme-B, which spent 81.99% of the allocated budget, the disbursements in other schemes are very delayed, only 24.71% for Scheme-A and 47.56% for Scheme- C (NESDC 2021a, 2021b). *This fact implies the failure of the government in coping with the COVID-19 impact.* Moreover, all of the financial aid was digitalized. All affected people have to apply via digital platforms and e-banking. The digital divide and error mean some people are left behind. There have been many reports about people who could not access financial aid because of a lack of digital know how.

Finally, Scheme-C is controlled by government organizations. From the beginning, there were 46,411 proposals for the amount of THB 1.4 billion, but to date there are only 231 projects approved, worth THB 133,114.8899 million. Of which, 99.28% of the allocation was for top-down projects. It is not only the lack of bottom-up participation; the civil society is not considered as a player in the COVID-19 game. After the civil society's criticism, the cabinet set a special committee to recruit the project from civil society and community. Finally, there only four of more than 400 projects in Scheme-C were approved, only 0.027% of the total budget. In

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<sup>2</sup> Currently, the proportion has changed, because of the second wave of the epidemic, the Cabinet decided to re-allocate funds; Program-B is increased to 60%, while Program-C is reduced to 33.5%.

conclusion, how the RTG decided to cope with COVID-19 *was to favour top-down failure protection.*

## **5. Preliminary Observations and the Next Phase Plan**

From early April 2021, the third phase of the epidemic expanded rapidly; the daily number of new cases increased to more than a thousand. The fact showed the government's failure, not only in terms of epidemic control but also in terms of socio-economic impact mitigation. *The downside risk not only resulted from the COVID-19 but also from the government's wrong direction.* While there are a higher number of new cases, the lower vaccination rate actually results from the vaccine purchasing policy. Human security in Thailand is therefore likely to continue to deteriorate. The next phase of this project will focus more on the socio-economic impact and human security of the vulnerable people, especially for the older people who are one-fifth of the Thai population and the most vulnerable in terms of physical health and often left behind in the digital disruption. Apart from monitoring the top-down protection in terms of the government project, the researcher will investigate the local initiatives, including the community-based service for the elderly along with the government-supported project, and the caregiver program and the village health volunteers to re-balance bottom-up empowerment with top-down protection. The researcher will gather quantitative and qualitative data in the fieldwork with parallel research projects in May 2021. This will be the primary data focus on the on-going impact of COVID-19 on the poor older people both in urban and rural areas, especially relation to the latest outbreak. Additionally, the phase will identify the key stakeholders and how to design bottom-up empowerment to support the vulnerable older people in different areas.

### **Notes**

1. Figure 1 used data as of March 2020. After that, the situation changed dramatically. In April 2020, the new infected cases increased to 36,292 and then to 94,575, and to 99,268 in May

and June 2020, respectively;

2. The government enacted the 2<sup>nd</sup> decree of a THB 500,000 billion public loan in late May 2021 because there was insufficient money in the 1<sup>st</sup> public loan;
3. The latest pandemic outbreak started from April 2021, and by July 2021 the daily total of newly infected people was more than 9000, with 90 deaths daily, the highest recorded so far. In early July, the cabinet agreed with the CCSA's proposal to lockdown all construction camps, blamed as a major cluster risk area in Greater Bangkok, and finally, the RTG decided to lockdown 10 high-risk provinces on 12 July 2021.

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