

Analysis of Lao PDR's Policy The Successful Policy of Lao PDR's Policy on Responding COVID-19

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Abstract

Coronavirus is a new type of virus, which until now has infected various countries throughout the world. Laos is also one of the countries affected by the pandemic and became one of the countries in Southeast Asia that managed to deal without swallowing a single death. This research aims to find out how the Laos government responds to the COVID-19 pandemic and explains the impact of the policies that were put in place during the pandemic. This study uses qualitative research methods with primary data obtained through search results in journals, documents, and official websites. This study provides the result that the Government of Laos is considered successful in dealing with COVID-19 by implementing several policies that are divided into 4 fields; economy, education, health, and travel. The research results also show that the policy is not only tangible success but also a decline in several fields, namely economic and social.

I. INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, the world was hit by a virus that can spread rapidly through a splash of saliva. The virus is known as SARS CoV 2 or COVID-19, which originated from China (Timeline: How the new coronavirus spread, 2020). COVID-19 was first confirmed by China on January 7, 2020 in Wuhan City, Hubei province. Likewise, on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared this virus as a pandemic [1]. Having a high rate of possibility to spread and transmit, COVID-19 has eventually infected various countries around the world, including ASEAN member states, which are geographically adjacent to the origin of the virus. As June 11, 2020, the ten ASEAN member states reported that there were 111,215 positive cases of

COVID-19, with a total death toll of 3,236 people [2]. Since then, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos have reported 0 cases of death due to COVID-19 as of June 11, 2020. Lao is the last ASEAN country infected with COVID-19 and until now the country with the smallest number of cases in the entire Southeast Asia region.

The first case of COVID-19 in Lao was recorded on March 24 and confirmed by the Ministry of Health of Lao People's Democratic Republic. The first two coronavirus patients are a 28-year-old man, who has travel records to Thailand, and a 36-year-old woman, who is a tour guide who has contact with tourists - that have tested positive for COVID-19 in Cambodia [3]. After confirming the two positive cases, the government took steps to screen people who had a history of interaction with the two positive patients

and increase the hospital's preparedness to deal with the possibility of additional cases. The government has also implemented strict policies for Laotian workers returning from Thailand. Later on, on March 30, 2020, the government set a lockdown policy by closing all international checkpoints and prohibiting mobility of people between cities and provinces. Lao officially declares a state of social emergency [4].

This situation impacts several sectors of life, such as economy, education, politics and health. According to a report from the World Bank, Laos's economic growth in 2020 is projected to range from negative 1.8% - 1%, and between 96,000 - 214,000 people are projected to fall into poverty as a result of the pandemic [5]. Based on this situation, we propose two research questions: How has the Lao government responded to the COVID-19 pandemic? What is the impact of the policies issued by the Lao government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic? This research will analyze the Laos government's policies more deeply and explain the impact of the policies taken at first half of 2020.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Literature Review

The first journal article was written by Lam WK, Zhong NS, and Tan WC with the title "Overview on SARS in Asia and the World". This journal article is published in the Journal of Respiratory from Wiley Public Health Emergency Collection Volume 8 Number 1, on November 14, 2003. This journal discusses how the SARS virus or Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome spread to 29 countries in various parts of the world and how it affects the economy and travel sectors. Furthermore, this journal article discusses the steps taken by WHO and the affected countries in the world to handle the spread of this virus. It was

found that the world anxiety that arose due to SARS was due to some reasons for not knowing the origin of the SARS virus and the lack of tests, treatment, and vaccine availability. The steps initiated by the WHO and CDC were to issue travel advisories not to visit areas affected by the SARS virus, carry out quarantine, control and port inspections and close down places that invite crowds of people. These conditions impact the aviation and tourism business, what this journal article has in common with what we write is the theme. Namely related to the steps taken in dealing with the spread of the corona novel virus. However, what we will raise in our journal article is the novel coronavirus type SARS CoV 2 or what is known as COVID-19. Whereas in this article the SARS or SARS CoV virus is related. Even so, if we relate it to the facts and data we get, the steps taken in overcoming the SARS virus are the same as handling the COVID-19 virus. In this journal, the coverage of the area discussed is the affected countries in the Asian continent, while in this journal article, we focus on Laos's country.

The second journal article related to this research is the journal by Riyanti Djalante, et al. This article, entitled The ASEAN's Responses to COVID-19: A Policy Sciences Analysis published in 2020 through the Social Science Research Network (SSRN). This article discusses analyzing policies being enforced in ASEAN in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. This article aims to analyze the policy responses of the ten ASEAN member countries in dealing with COVID-19. This article explains Laos's situation, which only has 19 positive cases of COVID-19, counted as of April 30, 2020. Riyanti, et al. Stated that Laos is the ASEAN member country, most recently infected by COVID-19. The author of this article explains the various steps that the Lao government has implemented regarding COVID-19, one of

which is to form the National Task Force Committee for COVID-19 Prevention and Control. The Lao government issued several regulations aimed at reducing the spread of COVID-19. The regulations are in the form of closing several provincial boundaries, prohibiting mass gatherings of more than ten people, setting prices, locking down several residents, and enforcing work from home for government workers. The articles by Riyanti et al. have the same objectives and objects as this research. Our articles and research both analyze policies being taken to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. The difference is in the subject and the scale of the study. The article by Riyanti, et al. Examines the response and role of ASEAN - by describing in general the policies of its member countries - on the COVID-19 pandemic, while our research examines the policies of the Lao government in dealing with COVID-19 and the impact of policies taken by the Lao government.

The third journal article related to this research is the journal by Nur Rohim Yunus and Annisa Rezki with the title "Policy of Enforcing Lockdowns to Anticipate the Spread of the Coronavirus COVID-19". This journal is published in the Syar-I FSH Social & Cultural Journal of UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta Vol. 7 No.3 (2020). This journal discusses the development of the Corona case in Indonesia, lockdown as an alternative policy in Indonesia, as well as the positive and negative impacts of the lockdown policy. The research methodology used is a qualitative method with literary and empirical approaches, as well as legal studies with a normative legal approach and a case approach. This journal concludes that the central government of Indonesia has established a national policy in the form of restricting activities outside the home, school activities at home, working from home, and worshipping activities at home only. Even

though this policy has a negative impact on the Indonesian economy, this policy is the best way that needs to be done to minimize the spread of the Coronavirus. The government certainly determines policies based on the carefully considered analysis. Then the policy to deal with COVID-19 was also strengthened through Law No. 6 of 2018 concerning Health Quarantine, and the ITE Law Article 45A paragraph (1), every person who deliberately and without rights spreads false and misleading news will be sentenced to six years imprisonment and a maximum fine of Rp. 1 billion. The reference to the ITE Law is to minimize hoax news that will cause unrest in the Indonesian people about the Coronavirus which is spreading rapidly. The relevance of Nur Rohim Yunus and Annisa Rezki's journals with our research is that there are similarities in the discussion. This journal discusses the central government of Indonesia, which issues and applies national policies when the state is infected with COVID-19. Likewise, with our research, we will discuss the national policies published and applied by the Laos, central government when the country was infected with COVID-19. This journal can be used as a reference and helps us strengthen the arguments in the paper.

B. Theoretical Background

1. Public policy

Taken from Public Health Policy Research: Making the Case for a Political Science Approach, Nicole F. Bernier and Carole Clavier stated that domestic policy or public policy is the final product of a series of research, evidence, and recommendations and is treated as a document that provides a legal force against public health recommendations. Consequently, most public health researchers seek to influence public policy through the formulation of

recommendations on the actions public health authorities should follow [6].

According to William Jenkins, public policy is a series of decisions taken by political actors or groups regarding the selection of goals and means to achieve them. William Jenkins stated that public policy is a political process consisting of several interrelated decisions (programs, legislation). Taxes, regulations, incentives, marketing, and propaganda are instruments of public policy, which are used to implement government decisions. Meanwhile, according to James Anderson, public policy is the act of actors who are full of gas or a series of actors facing a problem of concern. Public policy is not tied to certain actors (such as government departments or agencies). Still, it involves all actors and solutions to problems are compiled by public authorities (such as several departments and administrations) [6].

2. Coronavirus

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Coronavirus, or what is known as COVID-19 is a group of viruses that can infect animals and humans. This Coronavirus causes respiratory tract infections in humans. Common symptoms of COVID-19 are fever, dry cough, and feeling tired. This virus can be spread by droplets secreted by someone who is exposed to it. This new type of virus was first discovered in China, Hubei province [7].

III. ANALYSIS

A. *Preparation of Laos in Facing COVID-19*

Even though Laos geographical borders directly with China, Laos is the last country in Southeast Asia to confirm a positive patient with COVID-19. Before COVID-19 infected Laos, the Lao government took several steps to contain

and prepare for the possibility of the virus spreading and infecting Laos. In January, the Lao Government formed a task force committee, which is charged to handle the coronavirus's spread. The task force should collect travel data and follow up on travellers' health status, especially tourists, students, business people, and workers traveling from China. Lao's flagship airline, Lao Airlines, announced that they would temporarily cancel all flights from Vientiane to three regional destinations in China, namely Changzhou, Shanghai and Hangzhou. This included as part of precautionary measures following the virus outbreak [8]. Migrants who have a travel history from China and South Korea will go through a more stringent screening process and are required to fill out a health declaration form to enter Laos [9].

The virus's global development has forced Laos to close various national borders, such as Vietnam and Cambodia. The Lao government also prohibits Laotians from non-essential travel, such as for reasons of tourism or commercial interests. Travelling abroad is only allowed for individuals' urgent matters that relate state and health interests [10].

The Lao minister had previously prepared several health facilities for COVID-19 patients. This preparation was carried out in line with the rapid spread of COVID-19 in various parts of the world and the large number of Lao workers returning from Thailand, due to the closure of several businesses in Thailand related to the spreading of COVID-19. Health workers are also provided with various training. Four hospitals (Mittapham Hospital, Mahosot Hospital, Setthathirath Hospital, and 103 Hospital) have been designed to isolate patients suspected of COVID-19. Provincial hospitals have also been prepared to isolate suspected COVID-19 patients in the province [11].

In the Laos Executive Economic Zone, which directly borders China, there are strict health controls for workers with their duties, which carry heavy goods in connection with the infrastructure development of the Kunming-Vientiane Railway. The worsening global situation prompted the Lao government to take several steps, such as closing schools to reduce the spread of COVID-19. To overcome hoax and provide accurate and real news and information, the Minister of Health of Laos created an official Facebook page “ສູນຂ່າວສານການແພດໝາຍສູນສຶກສາ Center of Information and Education for Health” [12].

B. The Lao Government's Steps to Respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Laos

Following Prime Minister Regulation No. 06, issued March 29, 2020, Lao residents were ordered to remain at home for 20 days (April 1-19, 2020) to reduce the spread of the virus. On April 15, 2020, government staff issued an extension of the lockdown period for 14 days [13]. Previously, on April 7, 2020, the World Bank provided US \$ 18 million for Lao, which was quite useful to handle the impacts of COVID-19. This assistance is aimed at overcoming losses in the economic and health sectors of Laos in fighting COVID-19. The Lao government has taken various steps to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, these steps are divided into the fields of education, health, travel, and the economy. In addition, the Lao government also has its own way of dealing with individuals who break the law during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the education sector, the Laos Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) announced all schools' temporary closure from April 22 to May 3. In a sense, all learning activities will be continued in

online form. Online-based schools are carried out as a government step in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in the education sector. The Ministry of Education prepares all online materials for the main subjects Mathematics, Laotian, and English. The online learning will also be available on TV, Radio, Facebook, and YouTube [13]. After implementing an online school in 2 months, on May 15, 2020, the Lao Prime Minister's office said that educational institutions such as kindergarten, elementary, junior high school, high school, and university would reopen on June 2, 2020 with a predetermined procedure. Schools are required to fulfill all the preparations needed to prevent COVID-19. The National Task Force for the prevention and control of COVID-19 provides conditions that must be completed by each school, such as the obligation to spray disinfectant in every school facility, use masks for everyone, checking body temperature before entering the school, seating arrangements at a one-meter minimum distance, and schools are required to provide soap, hand gel, and sinks for students. Not limited to that, the entire school community is obliged to monitor the student's body's condition. Thus, if someone has symptoms of COVID-19 they can be immediately rushed to the hospital or sent home [14].

In the health sector, the Lao Ministry of Health issued a notification containing the distribution, storage, use and reports regarding monitoring medical equipment for the COVID-19 prevention. The medicines and medical equipment will be distributed by the central government and stored in the provincial food and drug authorities' warehouses. The Lao Ministry of Health also requires documentation and report regarding the supply, use, distribution, and receipt of drugs or medical equipment. The government also requires private health

clinics not to treat patients infected with COVID-19 [15]. In the field of travel (travel), the Laotian government's measures in handling the spread of COVID-19 was issued on March 23, 2020. It stated the needs of supervision in the implementation of the prohibition of population mobility. The resolution includes regulations from the Lao government regarding the closure of all local border checkpoints while maintaining international border checkpoints. Issuance of deferred visas, including e-visas and all forms of tourist visas which have a period of 30 days. Regarding migrants who want to enter Laos, they are required to bring a health certificate that records their travel history for the last 14 days, and they are supposed to hand it over to the officer. It also applies to Lao workers who just returned from abroad. This is regulated in Notification no. 15/NTCC dated 24 March 2020. Cancel visa exemption arrangements for all countries with visa exemption regulations, temporarily. Laos citizens are advised not to travel internationally, using public transportation. Entrants who pass the screening stage are required to isolate themselves for 14 days, be closely monitored, and report their progress. Migrants suspected of being infected with COVID-19 will be taken to the hospital right away, without delay, for further monitoring and treatment [15].

In terms of mobilizing newcomers who wish to return to their home countries, the Lao government in PM No. 06/PMO instructs the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to facilitate and coordinate with related institutions. The Embassy in Lao also arranged flights for its nationals, in connection with the suspension of commercial flights in Laos. Due to the suspension of public transportation in Laos, the Public Works and Transport Department in Vientiane issued Notification No. 2207/DPWT.VTE on

March 31, 2020. In this notification, the related parties announced the suspension of transportation services for passengers and goods, such as soil, stone, and sand, until 19 April 2020 [15].

Based on a World Bank report, Lao's economic growth in 2020 is expected to experience a decline in the economic sector. Therefore, the Lao Government-issued several economic aids which were generally divided into three parts. The first aid relief is for taxes. Based on Decree No.31/PM, The Income Taxes of micro-businesses will get relief for three months (April - June 2020) [16]. The Laos government also imposed tax postponement relief on the tourism sector. Then, also make adjustments to electricity bills and water pipeline for the housing and business sectors. Simultaneously, the Personal Income Tax (PIT) exemption is applied to all staff and civil servants who have an income of below 5,000,000 Kip within three months (April - June 2020). Second, based on Decree No.31 / PM, the Lao Government stipulates exemption from customs duties on imports of health goods and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) such as masks, medical equipment, hand soap, etc., according to the list of instructions from the Ministry of Industry and Trade, and the Ministry of Health [16]. Third, the Lao Bank, issued an intensive assistance policy to commercial banks, to provide credit assistance to the private sector as stated in Decree No. 238/BOL dated March 26, 2020. This decree allows commercial banks and financial institutions to delay the debt repayment period including loan principal and interest; reduce interest rates and fees for borrowers [17].

The Lao government has also reduced spending in the public sector. Where about 10% of the administrative costs of state spending are reduced. This includes expenses for some events, such as: 1) Meetings and Seminars, 2)

Scientific studies, 3) Welcome foreign guests, 4). National Celebration, 5). Construction Costs, 6) Fixed assets, and others. In the investment sector, licensing for infrastructure projects in Lao has also been postponed until 2021 [18]. On March 31, 2020, the Laos Ministry of Industry and Trade, through Decree No. 348/IC.MOIC stated the obligation to close the factory on April 1 - 19, 2020 as an action to reduce the number of the spread of COVID-19. But with the exception, factories related to food products remain. And factories that are closed are obliged to allow employees to stay onsite and enforce social security protocol. As well as required to prepare data and report the impact of the closure to the National Council of Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Industry and Trade of Laos.

In addition to the four areas above, the Lao government is also trying to deal with the controversy and hoax that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. In times like this, the information that spreads is often not being validated its truth and can be justified by some people. For example, three residents' deaths were allegedly caused by COVID-19 spreaded over social media, before the Lao Government declared positive confirmed cases of COVID-19 in its country. In fact, the death of the three residents from Phongsaly Province was caused by influenza. The other misinformation or Hoax is regarding the post related to the benefits of boiled egg could protect from COVID-19 also shocked Lao netizens. In this regard, the Lao Minister of Health issued an official Facebook page to provide accurate information related to public health, including information updates related to COVID-19. Students and ministry staff are prohibited from uploading or sharing information related to COVID-19 while carrying out their duties [12].

C. Laos Current Condition and The Impact of Laos Government Policy

The last addition of one positive COVID-19 case in Laos occurred on April 12, 2020, where the positive cases increased to 19. These 19 cases were the last positive patient infected with the Corona virus to date, June 15, 2020. Then on June 9, The Lao government announced its success in fighting COVID-19, this is because all patients infected with COVID-19 in Laos were successfully discharged from the hospital [19]. The recovery of 19 patients proved that not a single death case occurred in Laos [20]. Laos has also become one of the countries in Southeast Asia that reported 0 deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic. This success is certainly obtained through various active participation, not only by the government but also the people of Laos, international organizations, and assistance from other countries. With no additional new cases, Laos's current state is back to normal. Schools have started to reopen, although it needed strict procedures, sports activities have been allowed to take place, businesses and offices have started operating normally. Domestic travel is allowed; however, foreigners are not yet allowed to enter Laos. The policy easing that occurs is still adjusted to the circumstances and awareness of the spread of COVID-19 [21].

Lao's success in handling COVID-19 cases does not always have a good impact, it can be seen from the social conditions of the society. As a result of the lockdown imposed by people who are engaged in the business sector, it has suffered many losses. Lao's dependence on its geography advantages, which are directly adjacent with China, give Lao an advantage in the tourism sector. This is because the tourism sector has a contribution which is valued at 4% of Laos's GDP. However, the lockdown policy has paralyzed the economy of

people who are dependent on tourism [22]. The travel and tourism sector which accounts for 11% of employment causes a lot of unemployment. It is estimated that 96,000-214,000 people have fallen into poverty due to the ongoing pandemic [23].

The unfavorable impact also affects the economic sector. The World Bank projects that Laos's economic growth will decline during the COVID-19 pandemic by -1.8% to 1%. Laos's vulnerability in the macroeconomic field has increased with the presence of COVID-19. Government policy measures exacerbated the fiscal deficit and increased the country's debt. Previously in 2019, Laos's fiscal deficit was at 5.1% of GDP, then this pandemic contributed to an increase in the deficit to 7.5% - 8.8% of GDP. The estimated increase in debt increases to 65% - 68% initially at 59% of GDP in connection with this. The economic slowdown due to COVID-19 has led to an increase in Non-Performing Loans, which weakens the balance sheet and hinders credit [23].

The implementation of social distancing and lockdown policies impacts the construction of the Kunming-Vientiane railway line, the result of the Laos-China cooperation which is part of the One Belt One Road megaproject. This temporary stoppage of project development could impact the project completion target, which is in December 2021. Even though the construction has stopped, the transportation of heavy goods is still being carried out. Nearly half of the workers experienced a reduction because workers from China were unable to return. This results in a double duty and having to carry on different types of roles that the workers have to do. According to a report from the Chinese Engineering Company, the work on the railroad project is carried out with a target acceleration by increasing the line construction from two kilometers per three days to one kilometer every day to

pursue the target of project completion [24].

IV. CONCLUSION

From the description above, it can be concluded that in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Lao government has taken several steps divided into four parts, such as Education, Health, Travel and Economic. These steps are considered successful because 19 positive cases confirmed by the Lao government have been declared cured without any deaths. Until now, Laos has no new cases added. This success is based not only on the government's efforts but also on the contribution of the Laotian people who are orderly and comply with existing policies during the COVID-19 pandemic. When the Coronavirus spread in China, the Lao government immediately began preparing ammunition for its country, such as closing conventional borders, preparing special hospitals to accommodate patients with the Coronavirus, and limiting commercial flights from China and South Korea. The Lao government also provides an official Facebook page to update the development of COVID-19 and ward off the spread of hoaxes.

Even though the Lao Government has anticipated various steps, COVID-19 pandemic continues to have quite a shaking impact on both the social and economic sectors. It started from slumping economic growth to changes in people's lifestyles that have to obey health protocols. The pandemic's impact was also felt by several parties working in the business and education sectors, which had to be temporarily closed to reduce the spread of COVID-19. After going through a dark period of 2 months, now the state of Laos is getting better, people's lives have started to run normally in line with implementing the New Normal policy by the Lao Government. It can be seen from schools that have begun to reopen,

domestic travel has started to be permitted, and companies that have started operating. In this way, it can be said that Laos has gradually returned to normal life.

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