

Thailand Government Strategy and Policy in Handling The COVID-19 Pandemic

Hamas Nurhan Rabbani Tunggal, Madda Asyafa Putra, Mario Ben Salim
Department of International Relations, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences
Universitas Sebelas Maret
Surakarta, Indonesia

hamasnurhanrt@student.uns.ac.id, madda.asyafa@student.uns.ac.id, marioben@student.uns.ac.id

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic destroyed various countries from various aspects. One of the countries affected is Thailand. For Thailand itself, they are more disadvantaged in the economic sector. Given that one of the leading economic suppliers in Thailand is from the tourism sector. The sector has also been devastated due to the absence of foreign tourists visiting Thailand due to the pandemic. With this, the local Government has taken various ways to restore the situation to normal. Four things are under the Government's spotlight, including the health insurance system, the application of social distancing, the imposition of national emergency status, and economic stimulus. With these several things, it can be said that this journal will discuss how the Thai government policy in fighting Covid-19 from the health sector, the economy, and others. In his efforts, many polemics occurred due to quite controversial policies. One example is when the Government asked rich people in Thailand to help solve the problem. It brought a lot of negative response on social media, for example, is much-scattered hashtag #BeggarGovernment.

I. INTRODUCTION

The COVID 19 pandemic cases are still ongoing in various countries in the world. The disease is believed to have started in Wuhan's city in Hubei Province, China, around the beginning of January 2020 and began spreading to other countries in the middle of the same month. One of the countries infected by this disease in Thailand, one of China's closest countries. It was noted that the first positive cases of COVID 19 outside China were in Thailand. This case was found on January 13, 2020, suffered by tourists from Wuhan itself [1]. Since a long time ago, Thailand has often received tourists from China, one of which is Wuhan.

Throughout 2019, tourists from China who came to Thailand counted around 10-11 million people. It was also

noted that there were more than 540 Thai flights, both to and from Wuhan [1]. The Thai and Wuhan flight traffic remained active until entering 2020 until finally they closed the flight paths of these two regions since the discovery of Wuhan tourists in Thailand who were exposed to COVID 19, as well as flight routes with other overseas regions. Gradually, local Thai residents also became infected, requiring the central Government to take immediate action to deal with this pandemic before conditions worsened.

The Thailand central Government enforces several rules and policies. For example, (1) Enlisted COVID 19 as one of the disease that receive health insurance for the Thai. (2) Implemented the social distancing by stoped all teaching and learning activities and face-to-face lectures accompanied, and substitute with online classes. (3) Established a National

Emergency Status, like restrictions on the sale of alcoholic drinks and the cancellation of the Songkran festival to prevent mass gatherings, and the provision of economic stimulus packages [1].

The Thai Government also issued policies to undergo a new normal there which were implemented after the decline in the number of positive cases of COVID 19 in Thailand since April 8, 2020. On May 13, 2020, no new cases were found [2]. This policy includes loosening permits to open public places such as markets, parks, sports venues, and shopping centres. Then, opening domestic flight routes at Suvarnabhumi and Don Mueang airports, and launching an application called Thai Chana by the Government, which monitors people who are infected with corona and providing QR Code facilities for non-cash transactions [2].

The latest news from the Reuters news portal regarding the COVID 19 case in Thailand reported that until mid-June 2020, the total number of new COVID 19 cases was still increasing, but in small numbers and there were no new cases of death due to this disease. For example, on June 5, Reuters reported one new case and no new deaths. As of June 11, there were no new cases or deaths. Then, on June 16, the conditions were still the same; namely, there were no new cases and deaths. On June 18, Reuters reported six new cases of freelance citizens travelling from India and Saudi Arabia, and no new deaths [3]. In fact, since May 2020, the number of new cases and deaths found has rarely exceeded 2-digit numbers, so this is proof that the handling of COVID 19 cases in Thailand can be considered good. However, sustainable handling must be carried out so that the risk of COVID 19 transmission in Thailand can be continuously reduced.

The explanation regarding Thailand government solutions outlined above are

only the general outlines. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze further the Thai central Government's strategy in dealing with COVID 19 and the results obtained from this strategy. Prior to that, the author will also explain how Thailand has felt the impact of the spread of this virus to their country.

II. FORMULATION OF THE PROBLEM

After the authors provide the background of this paper, the authors formulate two questions that will be discussed here, including:

1. How has Thailand had the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in their country?
2. What are strategies and policies that Thai Government adopted in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic? and how are the results of these strategies and policies?

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Data Gathering Method

To gather data and information used for this paper, authors are using **literacy method**. This method relies on written sources like journal articles, books, official news, and official website data. For this paper, authors tend to gather information and data from official websites and news updates. This is because there have not many journal articles which are the research cannot be synchronized with the topic authors discuss this time. However, it can be understood because the topic is relatively new.

IV. ANALYSIS

A. COVID-19 Impact toward Thailand

With the pandemic that has plagued Thailand, one sector that has had an impact is the economy. This is based on two main factors, namely

tourism and domestic activities, that have stopped completely. According to the Prime Minister of Thailand, Prayut Chan-Ocha, who was quoted on the Reuters news site, said that it is likely that the economic impact of the pandemic will last for the next nine months [4]. The Thai Government also predicts that the country's economic situation would decline to 40 billion US dollars [5].

To reduce this quite bad impact, the Thai Government asked for help from people with high economic status to overcome the economic downturn [6]. This has been done a few months ago when Covid-19 broke out in Thailand, where the Government has asked for help from the 20 richest people in Thailand, one of which is the King of Thailand, Maha Vajiralongkorn, who donated medical equipment to support treatment and care both for COVID 19 patients and the public. As a result of this unusual thing, a few moments after that the hashtag #BeggarGovernment was also widely discussed on social media, especially Twitter. Despite receiving many cons from the community, the central Government of Thailand continues to do this for the sake of the sustainability of all sectors of national life [7].

The Central Bank of Thailand also predicts that the country's economy will fall by around 5.3 per cent in 2020 [8]. This can be categorized as the worst economic recession since the crisis year in 1998. The main cause of the economic downturn in Thailand is the decline in income from the tourism and domestic activities. For the tourism sector, it usually manages to contribute 20 per cent of the country's GDP. The decline was based on the dominance of Chinese tourists who frequently visited Thailand. Because the hotspot of the pandemic is China, the Thai Government has stopped and blocked foreign tourists' arrival to cover the spread of the virus that has occurred. Last year, 39 million tourists

managed to contribute US \$ 60 billion in income [9]. Of the nearly forty million tourists, it is noted that 10 million of them are Chinese.

As a result of foreign tourist arrivals' blockade, the souvenir center and various tourist attractions were deserted. This was also supported in January where pollution by smog caused tourist visits to decrease. This was mentioned by the Association of Thai Agents, which was reported on the tatnews.org website, which stated that smog and the rising bath currency were the main causes (TAT issues travel advisory on Bangkok's air pollution, 2020). TAT also stated that as many as 25 thousand tour guides have become unemployed due to the reduced number of tourists visiting. With this, the Vice President of the Phuket Tourism Association said that the Government's role was a big part in restoring all the conditions caused by the pandemic.

Moreover, the tourism sector has previously stated that it contributes one-fifth of the country's income in terms of the economy. However, this can be quite a dilemma because all parties must feel disadvantaged due to this. So, the Government prioritizes assistance as a whole and is not differentiated.

An example of tourism that requires government attention is the elephant sanctuary. When there are not many tourists visiting, the Government also has a stake in maintaining tourist attractions and ensuring that various animals in the area can eat. One of the leading tours in Thailand is an elephant sanctuary which has succeeded in attracting local and international tourists. With this, the Government created an agency that aims to take care of all the elephants in the area so that they are well. The agency is called Elephant Asia Rescue and Survival [10]. The Government expected that all aspects its impact on the Thai economy is

not crushed when the pandemic has ended.

The polemic that has emerged between the Government and several tourism sectors is the policy that states that the state has banned foreign tourists visiting Thailand. Whereas usually in July-August each year, the peak of foreign tourists visiting Thailand for vacation. Both the government and local tourism workers are also at a disadvantage. Also, tourism businesses such as online gambling games have decreased in visitors due to the rampant online crime cases due to Covid-19. Reporting from Thailand-business-news.com Asian GClub Casino as a businessman stated that previously many players visited the site, but now it decreases due to rampant fraud caused by the pandemic [11]. Paying taxes to the Government is hampered, which is one of the reasons for the economic decline.

B. Efforts by the Thailand Government

The first case of COVID 19 outside China occurred in Thailand on January 13, 2020. At that time, a tourist from Wuhan visited Thailand. Thailand itself often receives foreign tourists, including Chinese tourists, especially in 2019 there are 10-11 million Chinese tourists who come. On the same day, the Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) Thailand, Nonthaburi province, headed by Anutin Charnvirakul, carried out various protocols to stop the virus's spread. Anutin Charnvirakul said that Thailand had implemented a fever screening protocol for all Wuhan visitors since January 3, 2020, at 4 international airports in Suvarnabhumi, Don Mueang, Phuket, and Chiang May [12]. By combining surveys in public and private hospitals, Thailand identified 12 patients under surveillance (PDP) or patient under investigation (PUI). Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha who was aware of this

situation, then emphasized MOPH the importance of providing accurate and reliable information to the public.

On January 21, 2020, Thailand intensively increased surveillance and monitored both from within and outside the country [12]. Many tourists are anticipated not to travel to Thailand during the Chinese New Year Festival. Moph implement measures of supervision and control that includes four aspects:

1. Increasing surveillance, screening every tourist who has made poor flights from Wuhan and placing tourists who are suspected of being infected in 5 separate international airports
2. Maintain standardization of clinical management and diagnosis for patients under surveillance
3. Improve the referral system for public and private hospitals
4. Increase surveillance in areas popular with tourists across the country.

Furthermore, the central Government of Thailand advises everyone visiting areas that have contracted COVID 19 to self-isolate by avoiding crowds, avoiding places selling animals, and avoiding people who have respiratory symptoms. People who have respiratory symptoms are encouraged to contact medical service at the hospital regarding travel history to China. Every passenger and flight crew who flew from Wuhan from January 3-21, 2020 received screening with a total of 19,480 passengers. Finally, the Government provides a hotline number for people who need more information.

On February 1, 2020, 12 confirmed cases have received treatment, and 7 patients have been discharged, so 19 cases. However, on January 3 to 31 alone, 334 people have been given PDP status. At this time, around 9,819 people in the world contracted the COVID 19 virus, with 9.692 people being Chinese citizens and the number of deaths reaching 213

people. The important thing to note is that there is an appeal from the Thai Government to the public not to spread fake news or hoaxes, especially those from unknown sources. The Thai Government insists that anyone who causes panic by spreading fake news will be punished by the Thailand Computer Crime Act of 2017 [12]. The Government also encourages people to be diligent in maintaining cleanliness and paying attention to the food they consume.

As of April 13, 2020, reported by Worldometers, Thailand had 2,579 positive cases but with a death toll of 40 people with a death percentage of 3% and the number of patients who had recovered reached 1,288 people. This figure is relatively small compared to countries such as Italy, England, France, the Netherlands, Spain, and Indonesia, which have a mortality rate of over 10%. Reporting from the Center of Area Studies, the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (P2W-LIPI) revealed several important points in Thailand during the COVID-19 pandemic, including:

1. Health Insurance System

The small number of cases of the COVID 19 virus could have been caused by the small number of people who also tested it. According to Worldometers, as of April 2020 1,440 per 1 million people have tested in Thailand. This is far below Malaysia and Singapore's population with 2,525 and 12,423 people testing per 1 million population. While Indonesia's conditions are much more severe, only 99 out of 1 million people take tests [1]. This shows that community participation or activeness is also an important thing in this matter. Perhaps Indonesia is experiencing coordination difficulties because it has an archipelagic form, and there are many cultural differences.

Compared to Singapore, which has a small area and population, Indonesia will certainly lose in coordinating its population. However, the level of

community activity is different. In Indonesia the level of awareness of the population is still minimal. Thailand has included the COVID-19 pandemic into its health insurance system [1]. So that every patient will get treatment for free, including for every foreign student who is studying at universities in Thailand. Mulyasari also said that even though surgical masks or N95 masks are rare items, hand sanitizers' availability is sufficient. Thailand itself is known as a country with the best health insurance system in Southeast Asia. The Thai Government, apart from conducting a large-scale screening at the airport, also provides a self-screening website for people who feel they have symptoms of COVID-19.

2. Digital Application Specialized of Social Distancing Program

Thailand, like other countries, applies social distancing to its people. As we know, social distancing means everyone is expected to reduce contact with other people. This is done by staying away from the crowd and not leaving the house if it is not necessary. Thailand admits that its people are obedient in carrying out this social distancing. A survey conducted by the Bangkok Post to 26,000 residents found that 70 per cent of respondents ran the social distancing protocol [1]. Starting in March 2020, schools and campuses in Thailand will be closed and replaced with online or online learning. Every student who returns is required to carry out self-quarantine for 14 days without exception. Every office and workplace has implemented work from home, which is no different from Indonesia. Furthermore, tourism places are closed. The closure of the tourism sector has a big impact on the economy, for example, in Phuket or Bangkok's tourist areas.

3. *Enforcement of a National Emergency Status*

Since March, 26th 2020, the Thai Government has imposed a National Emergency Status. This period will last until April 30. The National Emergency Status is the same as a lockdown in Indonesia and several other countries such as Italy. This means that every access in and out of Thailand will be closed, there will be a ban on activities involving crowds, restrictions on domestic travel, and closure of shops except for shops selling necessities [1]. Restaurants, including hawker street (street food), shopping malls, stores, and traditional markets are closed except for service home delivery of food, the grocery store or supermarket, drug store or pharmacy, grocery store items - a staple item, and stores or mini -market. Important places such as ATMs, banks, gas stations, hospitals, postal services and factories remain open. During this National Emergency Status, the

Thai Government actually did not set a curfew, but a curfew was set starting April 3, 2020. People must stay at home from 22.00 to 04.00 and fined or jailed if they violate [1]. This National Emergency Status also led to the Songkran Festival's cancellation, which is a major celebration in Thailand. This festival used to celebrate the end of the dry season with a visit to a shrine, but nowadays the festival is celebrated with a new culture, namely the famous water feast. In the run-up to the Songkran Festival celebrations, the Government limits the sales of alcoholic beverage to prevent people from gathering for drinking party.

4. *Enacting economic stimulus*

In the period from March to April the Thai Government provided the economic stimulus for its people. Economic stimulus means financial assistance to help an economy that is threatened by COVID-19. The

Government provides funding of ฿5,000 or equivalent to Rp 2.4 million to 9 million people for 3 months [1]. The second aid package was launched on April 7, 2020. And the third is in the form of an extension of cash assistance until September, investment in infrastructure and creating jobs, and soft loans for small and medium enterprises. Afterwards, the 6 largest banks in Thailand also provided loan interest discounts.

Reporting from the Bangkok Post, on July 1, 2020 Thailand announced that all forms of a lockdown or National Emergency Situations would be lifted, including international flights and travel between provinces. Even so, Secretary-General Gen Somsak Roongsita said that "Everyone's cooperation is important. This concerns the use of masks, social distancing, and limiting activities. During this outbreak (COVID-19) is still spreading in the world, we have to fight for a while". In the future, the curfew will be relaxed and flight restrictions removed.

A series of steps taken by the Thai Government succeeded in stopping the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The latest Department of Disease Control (DDC) report on June 25 stated that one new patient was a Thai citizen who had just returned from Egypt. This patient has now been treated, mostly when the DDC wrote that this is a lesson that other countries need to monitor when people return to their normal lives. Despite the increasing number of patients, the DDC report said that the total number of cases reached 3,158 with 3,038 successfully cured or the equivalent of 96.2% of the total cases. There were no new reports of deaths, so the death rate remains at 58 cases.

V. CONCLUSION

Thailand is the first area outside China to be directly affected by the COVID-19 virus, because a tourist from Wuhan was detected with the disease

when they visited Thailand. This news was announced on January 13, 2020. Thailand became the first country to be infected, apart from being close to China, because it was known that Thai and Chinese flight flows were very dense. In 2019, Thailand received around 10-11 million tourists from China. Air traffic connecting Thailand and Wuhan also reached 540 airlines. It is a fairly dense number until they finally closed the flight paths of these two regions since the discovery of Wuhan tourists in Thailand exposed to COVID 19 well as flight routes with other overseas regions.

With the outbreak of COVID 19 in Thailand, we can see that the pandemic has a considerable impact on the Thai economy, especially in the tourism sector. As one of the countries in the world rich in culture, Thailand feels many bad effects because all tourism activities have died. This is because many tourists visiting Thailand come from abroad, and this pandemic has forced Thailand to close overseas flight routes. With the blocking of entry to tourists from abroad, Thailand's Gross Domestic Product has also experienced a significant decline. In addition, many residents engaged in tourism also lost their jobs. This followed because there were no visitors, so the owners could not pay them.

To overcome this community, the Thai Government also made a unique breakthrough by asking for help from people with high economic status there to participate in domestic economic recovery. Finally, where finally there were 20 of the richest people in Thailand who also donated for handling. COVID 19. This is done so that all aspects that are affected can be controlled thoroughly. Even though some of the Government's steps have drawn pros and cons, they are still running it for the benefit of all sectors of national life there.

The Government's move to impose a National Emergency Situation was a

decisive step, which was still implemented despite opposition from some people. Not only that, as compensation, the Thai Government is trying to help the middle- and lower-class society by providing what is called an economic stimulus. The next step was followed by a cut in loan interest by the six largest banks in Thailand.

Another thing that needs to be underlined is that the Thai Government is moving fast. Since the first case appeared, which is also the first COVID-19 case outside China, the Thai Government immediately imposes a screening at every international airport. Good medical personnel and health insurance can bring Thailand to an average cure rate of 96.2%, which is arguably very high. It should be noted that apart from the Government, the Thai people themselves also reflect supportive measures, which based on the survey, their participation rate is quite high. The central Government also banned one of its biggest festivals, the Songkran festival, and banned liquor sale to prevent crowds from gathering. The decision not to impose access and exit closure may be a separate consideration for the Thai Government.

Although there is still an increase in positive patient cases and deaths due to COVID-19, but not large numbers. As reported by the news portal Reuters, the number of positive patients and deaths due to COVID-19 in Thailand during the month of June 2020 did not show a sharp increase. As quoted by previous authors, Reuters reported on June 5 that Thailand had only 1 new case and no new deaths. Furthermore, on June 11 there were no new cases or deaths. On June 16, the conditions were still the same; namely, there were no new cases and deaths. Finally, on June 18, Reuters reported 6 new cases of citizens who had escaped from India and Saudi Arabia, as well as no new deaths. Thus, we can conclude

that a series of policies and actions by the Thai central Government, coupled with its people's supportive attitudes and behaviour, have effectively reduced the number of COVID-19 transmission in the country.

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