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Covid-19 pandemic in South Korea

# How South Korea flattened the curve, and who pays the bill

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**As of April 19, South Korea is reporting 10,661 confirmed coronavirus cases and 234 Covid-19 deaths. The country has been widely praised for its relative success in flattening the infection curve and South Koreans rewarded President Moon Jae-in's Democratic Party with a landslide victory last week. [1]** According to the Guardian, "Moon's left-leaning Democratic party and its smaller affiliate won 180 seats in the 300-seat assembly - the biggest majority in the national assembly by any party since South Korea's transition to democracy in 1987 - according to the Yonhap news agency. The conservative opposition United Future party and its smaller sister party won 103 seats. Turnout was 66.2%, higher than any parliamentary elections held in South Korea since 1992." [2]

At the same time, coronavirus remains prevalent in South Korea and the danger of new outbreaks are real. And while South Korea has succeeded in flattening the curve, it cannot avoid the global economic crisis that is escalating in its wake, as the *Economist* reports, "the IMF expects the South Korean economy will shrink by 1.2 per cent this year, down from an earlier forecast of 2.2 per cent growth."

**No Borders New: Please describe the state of the pandemic in South Korea. How many people are infected? How many have died? What do experts expect in the coming weeks in terms of how fast the contagion will spread.**

**Woo Seoc-Gyun:** As of April 19, South Korea, which has a population of over 51 million, has conducted more than 461,233 Covid-19 tests. 10,661 confirmed coronavirus cases have been reported and 234 people have died. [Covid-19 figures updated] 6,463 people who have been diagnosed with Covid-19 have since recovered. The death rate is about 1.79 percent. By way of comparison, Germany has a 2.2 percent Covid-19 infection rate and 1.8 percent death rate, which is the lowest in Europe. But given that Germany is not conducting Covid-19 tests on those who died, South Korea is considered one of the countries that has most effectively controlled the spread of Covid-19.

From January 20, when the first case was reported, through February 26, there were only 30 confirmed Covid-19 cases. On February 28, the 31st confirmed case was reported in Daegu, the 4th largest city in South Korea, which is about 237 kilometers away from the capital city Seoul. This 31st confirmed Covid-19 patient turned out to be a member of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, a South Korean-based megachurch. Then large cluster of cases began to occur among Shincheonji churchgoers in Daegu, but luckily the community spread was confined in Daegu and the surrounding areas. Although the Shincheonji Church has a huge membership, which is about 250,000 (approximately 0.5 percent of the South Korean population), tracing them was possible through membership lists, and the confirmed patients were relatively young so the death rate was relatively low. But due to the patient surge caused by the community spread, the hospitals in Daegu could not handle all the patients so about 23 percent of the patients could not find hospital beds until March 16. Due to the lack of sufficient hospital beds in Daegu many patients ended up dying in Daegu. The infection cluster among Shincheonji members and followers made up 50.6 percent of confirmed cases (5,602 people infected by the virus).

The fact that South Korea is geographically close to China - the average number of people who entered from China was about 20,000 people per day until early February - combined with our experience from the 2015 MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) outbreak, which hit Seoul and Gyeonggi Province hard, made it possible for the government to impose social distancing very early on, to conduct mass Covid-19 tests and isolate patients, and to trace and isolate those who have contacted Covid-19 patients. All these measures have been very effective, especially given the fact that the Shincheonji Church cluster infection occurred at the beginning of Covid-19 outbreak

in South Korea. But many experts say that Shincheonji case produced an optical illusion effect. There is now a slow but steady increase of community infections reported in Seoul and the surrounding Gyeonggi Province, which are home to about 50 percent of South Koreans. Governor Lee Jae-myung of Gyeonggi Province warned on April 4 that "An explosion of novel coronavirus infections is coming in the nation and it is time to prepare the worst scenario of mass infection."

Right now, the government is enforcing low intensity social distancing. All schools and universities are currently closed and students are taking online classes. Religious gatherings and any other large indoor activities have been suspended, but offices, factories, restaurants and cafes are allowed to open. This low intensity social distancing was extended until April 15.

**NBN: How has your healthcare system responded to the crisis? What are your health care system's greatest weaknesses? What are its greatest strengths?**

**Woo Seoc-Gyun:** So far we have managed to handle the public health crisis. The national health insurance (universal health care) was introduced to South Korea as a result of the June Democracy Movement and the Great Workers' Struggle from July to September in 1987. The fact that all healthcare institutions in South Korea, regardless of whether they are public or private, must accept the national health insurance and that all hospitals are non-profit institutions is one significant strength we have in South Korea. On the other hand, the percentage of privately-owned and operated hospital is really high, representing about 90 percent of the total while the number of public hospital beds accounts for only around 10 percent of the total. There are about 10 hospital beds per 1,000 people, but there are only 1.3 public hospital beds for every 1,000 people in South Korea, which is much less than other countries, such as Germany (3.3), France (3.8), Britain (2.5), Spain (2.1) and Italy (2.0).

**NBN: Describe the official political response to Covid-19 in your country from the far-right and conservative parties, to liberal and social democrat parties, and the parties of the left if applicable.**

**Woo Seoc-Gyun:** There are not many differences between far-right and conservative parties in South Korea. The right-wing opposition party and its ally Korean Medical Association (KMA)'s rightwing leadership claim that the Covid-19 has spread in South Korea because the liberal government did not ban all Chinese visitors. But epidemiologists believe that the outbreak of Covid-19 in South Korea had begun even before Wuhan was locked down.

The ruling Democratic Party is a liberal party. Justice Party, a social democratic party, has not strongly criticized government's Covid-19 response, but instead argues for expanding the public health systems. The Minjung Party, who are nationalist social democrats, criticize the government's neoliberal policies while emphasizing the need to expand the public healthcare systems.

The Workers' Solidarity organization, which is part of the International Socialist Tendency, argues that Covid-19 stems from the capitalism's contradictions and that President Moon Jae-in's administration is incapable of handling the current economic crisis. They argue, therefore, that workers must fight back against the government's attempts to impose the burdens caused by the economic crisis on the working class. They also criticize policies that weaken and promote privatization of the public healthcare system pursued by both the previous conservative and the current liberal governments alike. They argue this privatization is the main culprit of the ineffective response to Covid-19, and that this may lead to further crises in the future.

**NBN: How have trade unions responded to the crisis? Especially public sector, education, and healthcare unions?**

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**Woo Seoc-Gyun:** The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), the largest network of democratic unions in South Korea, has put forward the following demands on the government in order to ensure workers' rights and workplace protections during and after the Covid-19 pandemic: protect the most vulnerable workers, such as irregular, subcontracted, and migrant workers; pay emergency disaster relief income immediately; form a Tripartite Labor, Management, and Government Commission; set up hospitals specializing in infectious diseases in all parts of the country; secure and increase spending on public hospitals and healthcare workers; reorganize and reform the current private-hospital-centered healthcare system and strengthen public health systems; and form a Covid-19 Task Force between government and labor. It also calls for international solidarity among workers.

The [Korean Public Service and Transport Workers' Union](#) (KPTU) - which represents workers in the public and social services sectors - has demanded protection from infections for essential public service workers and employees working at care facilities. KPTU also demands strengthening public control of railroad and public transportation.

The [Korean Teachers and Education Workers' Union](#) (KTU) has demanded the government protect teachers by providing masks and hand sanitizers, to guarantee sanitizing after-school care facilities, and the implementation of paid family leave. It has also demanded concrete assistance for teachers to be able to teach online classes.

The Korean Health and Medical Worker's Union (KHMU) - the largest hospital workers union - demands more hospitals specializing in infectious disease, strengthening public health systems, and healthcare workers protections. The Korean Hospital Workers' Union also made similar demands such as: increasing the number of public hospitals and securing a larger government budget for the public health system; protecting healthcare workers by providing comprehensive PPEs to all those carrying out essential public services or working in public or in high-traffic areas; and no layoffs during the pandemic, especially for temporary and contracted healthcare workers.

**NBN: How have social movements (student, feminist, ecological, immigrant, indigenous, etc.) responded to the crisis?**

**Woo Seoc-Gyun:** On March 18, medical and healthcare sector NGOs, KCFU, hospital workers unions, feminist groups, and social services providers announced a joint-statement calling for the followings: an increase in government funding for social safety net provisions such as disaster relief benefits; increasing the number of medical and healthcare workers for public hospitals; guaranteed paid sick leave, paid leave, paid family leave as well as developing a plan to support the most vulnerable workers; public control and free distribution of PPEs and masks; an end to unreasonable demands from the Korea Management Association; and that news outlets should stop scapegoating and blaming people for the spread of the virus based on their nationality, religion, or region.

On March 31, about 380 civil society and non-governmental organizations representing religious, labor, feminist, environmental, human rights, farmer, and urban poor community and activist groups made the following seven suggestions: (1) distribute special crisis relief funds immediately, (2) fix the underfunded and insufficient social safety net, (3) no layoffs, (4) expand the public healthcare system both qualitatively and quantitatively, (5) take steps to proactively address climate change, (6) support international solidarity, especially providing assistance to Iran and other countries hit hard by Covid-19, (7) promote solidarity among citizens.

The second demand I mentioned above includes calling for a moratorium on all evictions.

**NBN: Can you describe the impact of the Covid-19 crisis and how you think it will impact national politics in the coming weeks and months?**

**Woo Seoc-Gyun:** I really hope we will not see any further public health crisis in South Korea. But if the government

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eases up on the low-degree social distancing (that is, not shutting down production and the distribution of goods, but only imposing social distancing in social and cultural contexts) beginning April 15, it could spark a new wave of Covid-19 infections in Seoul and the surrounding areas, which is the most densely populated region in South Korea.

Source [No Borders News](#).

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[1] *The Guardian* 11 April "[Why is South Korea beating coronavirus? Its citizens hold the state to account](#)".

[2] *The Guardian* 16 April "[South Korea's ruling party wins election landslide amid coronavirus outbreak](#)".