

Horizontal Partnership or Vertical Integration? Civil Society Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Challenge Beyond in India and China

The extensive social disruption and loss associated with the COVID-19 pandemic has been unprecedented. Rapid spread of the virus overwhelmed health systems in several countries, including China and India. China shocked the world with its first move to implement a full-scale lockdown in the city of Wuhan, home to 11 million residents. India followed through with one of the world's strictest national lockdowns (Rukmini 2020). The lockdowns are "exacerbating interconnected psychological, social and economic crises including poverty, unemployment, food shortages, xenophobia, domestic abuse and social unrest", according to the Interim report on WHO's response to COVID-19.

The crisis calls for stronger government-civil society collaboration and international cooperation. The reasons for collaboration are very clear: The public health crisis challenges the state's capacity, and the state is in critical need of civil society assistants to fill the gap. Globalization also puts all countries under a shared faith as economic and social costs of any one country have a ripple effect globally. Thus, transnational collaboration is also much needed to complement the domestic effort. Yet, the model for government-civil society collaboration could be vastly different in each country, which may or may not explain the outcome of pandemic response as it is too quick to jump to a conclusion. Nonetheless, the crisis exposes the state and society relation, which help to further our understanding of internal governance between authoritarian and democratic country.

India and China have represented two different models of disaster response. In the case of India, the government shows eagerness to collaborate with civil society organizations (CSOs)

and even nudges those receiving foreign donations to reallocate the fund for immediate disaster relief (Tandon 2020). The partnerships between the India government and civil society organizations are characterized as “horizontal” (Kant 2020). Media reports highlight that civil society organizations have taken the lead in designing and implementing response efforts with regard to the ongoing pandemic. International organizations with strong presence across the country have also put forward several joint response initiatives to combat the virus. All along, the role of the government in India has been facilitative rather than leading such efforts.

In contrast, China exhibits a more top-down approach in its disaster response. The state orchestrated the whole relief operation where selected civil society organizations have contributed to the institutional efforts. The state-led model, here I call “vertical integration,” stresses the leadership role of the state in controlling and commanding the activities of civil society organizations as those organizations are extensions of the government body. For example, shortly after the announcement of lockdown in Wuhan, the Communist Youth League, government organized nongovernmental organization (GONGO) in Wuhan mobilized more than 7000 volunteers online within 12 hours (Fu, 2020). These state-recruited volunteers were sent out to different neighbourhoods and communities to work with the state led neighborhood committees and neighborhood grid management teams. Under the state’s supervision, volunteers helped to distribute grocery and medical supplies. While the Chinese state, like their counterpart in India, encourages the participation of civic groups in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, the state also has been “heavy handy in repressing grassroots civil society” (Fu, 2020:A1). The vertical integration model only permits organizations with strong government background to be able to fundraise during the crisis, and all other civil society organizations were asked to obey the instruction from the state (Dong and Lu 2020). Taken together, under a strong

state-led relief effort, civil society organizations only play a marginal role in the national battle to the coronavirus in China.

The different forms of government and civil society collaboration during COVID-19 pandemic, whether it is “Horizontal Partnership” in India or “Vertical Integration” in China, are shaped by and helps to reinforce dominant political systems. We saw the different paths from India and China’s approach to non-profit regulations are now converging in the same direction. Despite a more favourable condition for civil society organizations in India to form horizontal partnership with the government during the crises, the two regulatory regimes are converging which India’s regulatory approach begins to resemble Chinese model. This trend is worrisome. The regulations destroy trust building between government and civil society. More importantly, critics point out that these amendments come at a time when India’s global rankings on democratic freedoms are in a “sharp decline.” They will undoubtedly have a deeply chilling effect on dissent and the freedoms of expression, assembly, and association, all guaranteed by India’s Constitution and international treaties.

The deeper roots of the convergence on regulatory regimes come from the rise of authoritarian conservatism in India and China. In the case of India, Modi has risen as a strong leader that takes advantage of the “people/enemy’ divide in the society to institute a majoritarian hindu nation (Sinha 2021). Modi’s authoritarian implementation of policy is accomplished by repression and control of oppositional voices. The revitalization of FRAC targeting civil society groups with transnational ties are the result of the right turn in India (Chacko 2018). China, similarly, also experiences a strong leader President Xi. The governance under President Xi shows less and less tolerance to dissents compared to the Hu period. The government approaches civil society with divide and rule (Han 2020). The divide and rule approach shows the

government actively incorporates the state approved NGOs to the party system while aggressively rejecting and repressing those that challenge the party state authority. China and India are not alone in their attempt to repress civil society as a global surge of anti-international organizations law. In the face of global crises like the COVID-19, we need more government and civil society collaboration and international cooperation to fight against the virus collectively. Nonetheless, by the end of March in 2021, a conservative estimate of 2.81million lives were lost. The devastation has raised questions why we fail so badly, and would this continue?

Data and Method

The outbreak of the global health crisis both contains and enabled the data collection for this study. The data collection for this study consists of two phases: a before covid pilot study in India and China, and an after-covid purposive sampling interviews. The first phase of the study was conducted in the summer of 2019. The research assistant of this project conducted a preliminary study with in-person interviews with several non-profit practitioners and experts in the city of Mumbai and New Delhi in India. Based on the initial data gathering, I refined the interview questions and narrowed down the focus on women and labor rights organizations, planning to launch a second field trip in the winter of 2019. However, due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the project was delayed. Nonetheless, it provides another opportunity for the author to ponder the meaning of global governance and the consequence of the INGO law on civil societies in both countries. I restarted the project in the fall of 2020 and began to conduct interviews with non-profit leaders and experts via Zoom. The second phase of the purposive sampling interviews included asking questions about INGO laws as well as the COVID-19 experiences, one of the biggest in the world. Here I used a pseudonymous name INGOX. I interviewed the director of the country office of INGOX in India as well as a representative from

INGOX's headquarter in the Netherlands. The interview with the representative of INGOX in China was unfortunately not secured at this point due to the political climate in China. The INGOX-China is headquartered in Hong Kong. The political standoff between Hong Kong and Mainland China significantly increased the difficulty of recruiting informants. Nonetheless, the interviews with INGOX's long-term local partners in China revealed some insights about the negotiation between INGOX-China has with the local government. The interviewees were recruited via person and professional network. In total, I conducted X interviews. Each interview lasted about an hour. All interviews were transcribed in both languages and I used MaxQDA, a qualitative data software to code the transcript.