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Matsuda Masahiko

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It would have been good to hear about the policies of Thailand, the Philippines, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. These five nations, each in their own unique manner, produced outstanding outcomes (Ryan 2020). When it comes to the number of fatalities per 100,000 inhabitants, Taiwan, South Korea, and the three heavily populated South Asian nations performed better than Japan, and the Philippines' death toll was almost identical to Japan's. These nations did not see the same death rates as wealthier Western European nations despite their comparatively low public investment in healthcare.

Muhammad Asad Latif

Department of Islamic Studies, Islamia University Bahawalpur

 <http://orcid.org/0009-0006-9378-9953>

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Just Another Crisis? The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Southeast Asia's Rice Sector

JAMIE S. DAVIDSON, ed.

Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2023.

Nearly all fields of social science have analyzed the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Just Another Crisis?* focuses on the pandemic's impact on the agricultural sector in Southeast Asia. This edited volume is based on the academic products of an online seminar held during the pandemic, in December 2021, by the National University of Singapore. The editor and the contributors, who attended the seminar, are experts on food, agricultural policy, and economics from research institutes in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Singapore. As indicated by its subtitle—*The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Southeast Asia's Rice Sector*—the book sets out to evaluate the pandemic's impact on the rice sector in Southeast Asia. The significant worldwide negative impacts of the pandemic on the industry and service sectors can be easily imagined. However, a novel conclusion of this book is that the pandemic did not cause a serious rice crisis in Southeast Asia, although it did have other negative effects, such as a widening

of the inequity gap and increased food insecurity among people experiencing poverty. It is suggested that one of the main reasons for this outcome is that, even though unpredictable ecological factors naturally influence agricultural production in Southeast Asia, the region had good rice harvests during the period due to favorable weather conditions. The damage from and social reactions to the pandemic were more severe and restrictive in urban areas, affecting urban economies more than rural areas and agriculture. Furthermore, as reported in Chapter 4, rural areas absorbed urban workers who were unemployed due to the pandemic, which potentially mitigated the negative impact (this point is discussed further below).

Given the pandemic's mild impact on the rice sector, the authors did not find any significant agricultural policy reform in Southeast Asian countries during the period. The findings might be a bit removed from those expected at the initial stage of this research project; however, the authors immediately discovered another space for their academic work. They paid attention to important policies set up before the pandemic in each country's rice sector, carefully examined their subsequent developments during the pandemic, and elaborated on the expected directions in the post-pandemic period. As a result, this book covers not only the impact of the pandemic on the rice sector but also a broader review of rice policies, a review of the historical background, and an analysis of long-term national policies. The authors have ties to policymakers in each country, which allowed them to closely examine the details of the cases while considering the national context. The profound knowledge and experience of the authors make this book a valuable contribution.

Chapter 1, by Jamie S. Davidson, the book's editor, lies at the core of the work. It provides a general background and concisely presents the volume's major findings. This chapter is also the hub for the following five chapters, providing insightful summaries of them. Chapters 2 to 6 deal with the detailed cases of five Southeast Asian countries, which may be classified into three types based on their international supply and demand for rice: the importer countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, which despite their substantial rice production regularly import the commodity to help meet domestic demand; the pure importer, Singapore, whose position is exceptional in Southeast Asia; and the big exporter, Thailand, which has long produced a significant surplus of rice. The case studies are valuable records of dynamics in the agricultural sector (especially rice policies) during the pandemic, a historic worldwide crisis, providing specific hints to researchers and policymakers in the region to be ready for the next crisis.

The different types of Southeast Asian countries are united with regard to the political significance of rice. Even though the relative importance of agriculture in their national economies has steadily decreased, their rice-related policies—with respect to international trade, price controls, subsidies, and so on—have been prioritized. The conventional framework addresses the old but unsettled dilemmas of producer or consumer, rural or urban, and agriculture or other industries; these are closely related to debates on national food security and the mitigation of

economic disparity (poverty alleviation)—in other words, the “production versus livelihood” framework referred to in Chapter 1. Vested interests also come into play.

Chapter 2, by Fatimah Mohamed Arshad, reveals the historical development of Malaysia’s rice policy by analyzing the subsectors from input to consumer over an extended period, including previous rice price crises. Arshad points out problems with the government’s strong commitment, such as monopolized rice imports and centralized distribution of agricultural input.

In the Philippines, the liberalization of rice imports was enacted before the pandemic. Chapter 3, by Roehlano M. Briones and Isabel B. Espineli, explains that the policy resulted in cheaper prices in the domestic rice market, suggesting that prices stabilized under the policy even though Vietnam, a major rice exporter, temporarily suspended exports during the pandemic. Consumers in the Philippines would have welcomed the situation, but support for domestic producers was necessary. Liberalization in the rice sector was a controversial issue and, according to Briones and Espineli, could have caused political instability.

Chapter 4, by Bustanul Arifin, deals with the case of Indonesia, including a discussion of government intervention in the rice sector. Interestingly, it reports that the growth of the agricultural sector during the pandemic partially contributed to Indonesia’s riding out the recession, although the country suffered a high death rate and negative economic impact. Compared with the impact of the Asian Financial Crisis in the late 1990s, the impact of the pandemic was less severe, at least in the Indonesian rice sector, and the latter may be said to have been “just another crisis.”

In Thailand also, rice is an issue according to the conventional framework, but in the context of an exporter. Chapter 5, by Thanapan Laiprakobsup and Manthana Noksavak, finds that the government has historically controlled domestic prices and taxed rice farmers. The authors examine the recently implemented subsidy program and the income guarantee policy to support producers. A large number of farmers could be an important political actor in democracy in general. The chapter finds that rice farmers have been left behind in Thailand, recently as well as during the pandemic.

Singapore’s food security is guaranteed by economic liberalism; thus, this was the country whose food sector was most affected by the pandemic. Chapter 6, by Jose Ma. Luis Montesclaros and Paul S. Teng, finds that Singapore paid more attention to its national food security after the pandemic, learning from the experiences of Vietnam’s rice export restriction during the pandemic and the previous global food price crisis in the 2000s. The authors insist on the necessity of an import diversification strategy.

While this volume highlights the commercial aspects of rice production and distribution, especially in the international market, rice has another aspect as an staple subsistence crop in Southeast Asia. It is important in Southeast Asia at the household level as well as the national level. It is consumed extensively by rural residents, and the amount required for domestic

consumption is much larger than the amount exported and imported—although the ratio of the rural population to the urban population and the share of rice in household expenditure (as shown in the table on p. 12) have decreased in recent years. The impact of the pandemic on the rice (or agricultural) sector in Southeast Asia might have been softened by the subsistence nature of rice farming in the region.

Meaningful socioeconomic relations between rural and urban areas in Southeast Asia emerged during the pandemic. Chapter 4 points out that in Indonesia, many urban laborers who temporarily lost their jobs returned to rural areas and engaged in the agricultural sector during the Asian Financial Crisis in the late 1990s as well as during the pandemic. The author refers to this as the “ruralization phenomenon” (p. 106). Such functioning of rural areas and agriculture as a safety net during an economic crisis has been observed widely in Southeast Asia. Rural villages in Northeast Thailand absorbed unemployed urban laborers from Bangkok during the Asian Financial Crisis (Sukaesinee *et al.* 2004) as well as the financial crisis in the late 2000s (Tomita *et al.* 2018); the same phenomenon seems to have occurred also during the pandemic. In Myanmar also, many international migrants to Thailand and Malaysia returned to their villages during the pandemic. Takahashi Akio (2020) found an economic shift from non-farm to farm work within rural villages during the pandemic in Myanmar, referring to it as “re-agrarianization” and pointing out the important role of agriculture as a fallback sector during a crisis. Many urban workers in Southeast Asia have the option to return to rural areas, where the cost of living is cheaper, and to work in agriculture if they choose. The pandemic shed light on the enduring rural–urban social bonds, which have existed for a long time and continue to exist even in contemporary Southeast Asia, where de-agrarianization has taken place. This could be an indication of society’s resilience to shocks such as the pandemic, supported by the subsistence aspect of agriculture.

Matsuda Masahiko 松田正彦

College of International Relations, Ritsumeikan University

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6305-5203>

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