

GLOBAL SOUTH

REVIEW

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Editor's Note

Mohtar Mas'ood

For a time we thought that we have achieved some progress in solving the perennial problem of human life: the “collective goods problem.” That is, the dilemma in facing a group (or a group of nations) when to serve its collective interests (such as peace) requires its members to forgo their individual (or national) interests. When International Relations was institutionalized as an intellectual enterprise soon after World War I, the first agenda was to deal with such a classic problem: How to avoid war by solving the collective goods problem.

Not so long ago, soon after the end of the Cold War, many leaders from various walks of life, governments, and non-governmental activists with liberal inclinations capitalized on the peaceful condition by encouraging numerous international collaborations in many dimensions of international relations. Especially after 1989, a lot of international and multilateral conferences with a variety of agendas tried to solve important global issues collectively, such as global economy and trade, population, health, environment, women, and many other important issues.

It was the time when some International Relations scholars saw the emergence of liberal international order. And the standard elements of the liberal order were there, such as military restraint, multilateralism, the growth of interdependence, and the spread of democracy (Haggard, 2013).

There was a feeling of “Triumphalism” among many International Relations scholars: *“Many expected that after the Cold War, there would be peace, order, increasing prosperity in expanding markets and the extension and eventual consolidation of civil and political rights . . . Politically, the world would be a more intelligent place and enter a new long peace.”* (Hawthorn, 1999). With the fall of the Soviet Union and its allies in Eastern Europe, there was even talk of “the end of history”, that is, the endpoint of man’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy (Fukuyama, 1989). *“There would be a “Common Marketization” of international relations and the world would achieve homeostasis.”* (Francis Fukuyama quoted in Menand, 2018).

In the International Relations academic circle, the liberal perspective seemed to be dominating the scholarly agenda. International Relations approaches that stress the significance of ideas and norms, the impact of domestic political and economic structures on international politics, and the roles of transnational movements and international organizations scored high on the International Relations research agenda. “The possibility of progress” seemed to be within reach (Roberts, 2008).

But, the “euphoria” did not last long. The dawn of the twenty-first century saw the signs of trouble. In the economic sphere, the “progress” of liberalization resulted in the release of aggressive power of humankind in the form of “run-away globalization” that drove fierce competition

among companies that mostly are supported by their national governments. So much so that the battle cry was “competitiveness.” And, to make discussion shorter, the end result was the worsening inequality, between as well as nations within nations. *“The World’s Richest 1% have more than twice as wealth as 6.9 billion people . . . Almost half of humanity is living on less than \$5.50 a day”* (OXFAM Report, 2019).

Hyperglobalization, in which global traders and investors, especially from strong economies, roamed the world freely, proved to be harmful to those who are not competitive. It resulted in lost jobs, declining wages, and rising income inequality in many open economies. Runaway globalization in the financial market also made the international anarchic system less stable, leading to recurring financial crises. These ultimately morphed into political problems. No wonder that many saw the post-Cold War liberal order as the culprit.

In the world political arena, the situation is no less troubling. As argued by Mearsheimer, *“international institutions . . . do not take on a life of their own, and thus do not have the power to tell the leading states what to do. They are simply tools of the great powers”* (2019). Such liberal governance was alive and well when the US was a dominant actor and believed in the liberal international order. When the US is not the only player in the game and vulnerable to foreign competition, the liberal international order was in deep trouble.

It was reflected in many circumstances: Global economic governance was contested, with WTO losing its authority. The force of globalization was challenged by “deglobalization”. Fierce economic and business competition between China and the US spilled over into strategic conflict. The project of “Uniting Europe” that started in the early 1950s and managed in 1992 to establish the European Union crumbled due to Brexit. These problems have littered world politics since the second decade of the 21st Century.

In 2012, Ian Bremmer already reported that there was no global leadership in dealing with global issues threatening humankind, a lack of cooperation between states, while major international governmental organizations (IGOs) suffered institutional paralysis. He complained that “at a time when leadership and solidarity are needed to deal with enormous global problems, such as poverty, environmental degradation, depleting resources” no country takes the initiative to lead (Bremmer, 2012). Everybody seemed to be very “unilateralist” and stick to a “transactional approach”: “What’s in it for us?”

And, to add insult to injury, amid such chaotic global condition, Covid-19 pandemics arrived. It surely caught most of us off-guard.

The COVID-19 pandemic affects all countries, but how governments respond is dictated by politics. As a consequence, we observed that IGOs were blamed, especially the World Health Organization (WHO); narrow or short-term interests were prioritized by many (“vaccine nationalism”), and “political authority” contravened “epistemic authority”. Efforts to assert technical ex-

pertise over politics have been done before, the reality is that the WHO has always been politicized by member states. Now the problem is worse, and as a consequence WHO failed to coordinate advice to states and offer management of the outbreak.

That was the political context of the outbreak of Covid-19.

Considering that COVID-19 pandemics is partly caused by the failure of political leaders to settle their problem, it is important to include a political dimension in the effort to control the pandemic, especially by reviving the multilateral approach to global health governance. How to encourage “political authority” to support “epistemic authority” in dealing with a global health issue.

IR scholars need to help revive and reinvigorate multilateral efforts to solve the dilemma of the “collective goods” problem. International Relations methods can inform decision-making and technical policy coordination, including in public health issues. Coordinated political cooperation is vital to overcome COVID-19.

Yogyakarta, June 2021

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