

'Prioritising common good' helping Asia fight virus

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The Straits Times, 20 June 2020

SINGAPORE - Countries in Asia have seen greater success in tackling Covid-19 and, apart from widespread testing and well-run healthcare systems, one reason could be a communitarian culture that puts the common good ahead of individual freedoms, said Professor Chan Heng Chee on Thursday (June 18).

Asian economies have seen greater success in tackling Covid-19 and, apart from widespread testing and well-run healthcare systems, one reason could be a communitarian culture that puts the common good ahead of individual freedoms, said Professor Chan Heng Chee.

This makes it easier for their governments to implement measures in a crisis with a high degree of compliance, the Ambassador-at-Large with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a virtual lecture on Facebook on Thursday.

She cited Singapore, South Korea, China, Hong Kong and Taiwan as among countries and regions that have managed to curb their coronavirus outbreaks.

"In spite of having different political systems, they all share to some degree a communitarian culture where social solidarity is valued," she said, adding that they had also developed resilience from dealing with previous virus outbreaks.

She was speaking in the first of a series of three lectures as the Institute of Policy Studies' 7th S R Nathan Fellow. Under the fellowship, Prof Chan's lectures, which examine Singapore's place in a world that is rapidly changing, will be published in a book.

On Thursday, she added that Western countries, such as the Nordic nations and New Zealand, which have also been successful in their fight against Covid-19, have elements of a communitarian spirit in their cultures too.

The emphasis on individual rights and freedoms saw some people in Western countries push back when their governments required them to wear masks or stay home, said Prof Chan.

"I think in Asia there is less of that... I put this to a communitarian culture."

Prof Chan also said Covid-19 has seen the return of the state as a positive force, with decisive and active governments dealing better with their outbreaks.

She also noted that the pandemic could be that watershed moment when surveillance technologies to monitor people's health become widely accepted.

In her wide-ranging lecture and discussion, Prof Chan talked about the disruption posed by other global challenges as well. The session was moderated by Professor Danny Quah, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

She also spoke about how democracy was being challenged and trust in government was being eroded in the West, as people felt their leaders were not listening and responding to their needs.

Today's capitalist system has exacerbated inequalities, leading to resentment, and is the cause behind rising political populism, she said.

Prof Chan also addressed how the international world order was unravelling, pointing out that this was sparked by two recent developments: the elections of US President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Since he came to power, Mr Trump has pushed an "America First" agenda, pulling the US out of what he saw as unfair agreements and treaties, including the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal and the Paris climate pact.

He has also weaponised tariffs, using them to strong-arm countries on non-trade related issues.

"When the largest economy in the world takes this direction, it can be destabilising for the rest," said Prof Chan, who was Singapore's ambassador to the US from 1996 to 2012.

Mr Xi, on the other hand, has come into office as the leader of a more confident China.

Beijing's "Made in China 2025" industrial policy, which seeks Chinese dominance in key industries, seemed a "direct threat to the US economy and security", and sent the message that China was taking steps to reshape the liberal international order, she said.

The world order is in flux, with the US seemingly determined to decouple its technological and trade links from China, she noted.

"My own sense is that the changing world order will look a lot messier before it becomes clearer," she added.