

The Human Rights Dilemmas of Zero-Covid

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Introduction

On May 13, 2022, after the U.S. crossed the one million marker in Covid-related deaths, China’s foreign ministry spokesperson contrasted the gruesome situation with that in China and asked “Who is mouthing the empty slogan of human rights and who is actually putting people first?” He went on to [proclaim](#) that “The answers are self-evident”:

In the spirit of putting people and life first, the Chinese government gives priority to people’s life, safety and health. It follows the “dynamic zero-COVID” policy and adopts targeted and science-based protocols for the most effective COVID-19 containment at the lowest cost possible. Any anti-COVID measure comes at a cost to the economy and society. But it is only temporary and worthwhile compared to priceless and irretrievable lives.

This “people first, life first” approach is officially used to legitimize its nearly three-year campaign against Covid-19. Under the so-called “dynamic zero-Covid” policy, heavy-handed government intervention measures, including mass PCR testing, mandatory quarantines, aggressive contact tracing, and city-wide snap lockdowns, have been undertaken to cut the local transmission chain and eliminate Covid cases as soon as they flare up. In hindsight, the seemingly quixotic pursuit of a Covid-free society shields most of the population from the virus. Nevertheless, stringent and persistent implementation of zero-Covid not only raises concerns over human rights and civil liberties violations, but also has the unintended result of put people’s overall health and wellbeing in harm’s way, thereby undermining the rights to develop and survive, which the government considers the core of human rights.

How Zero-Covid Protects People’s Health

Measured by the number of Covid infections and mortality, China is by no means one of the most successful in the world. With nearly 20 percent of the world’s population, China has recorded only 1.1

million cases, accounting for 1.1 percent of total Covid cases worldwide. Most of the infections occurred in Wuhan in the spring of 2020 and Shanghai in the spring of 2022. It registered 5,226 Covid deaths – most of them occurred during the Wuhan outbreak in the spring of 2020 – which is less than 0.5 percent of the U.S. mortality level and almost negligible compared to the 6.61 million deaths worldwide.. While the U.S. continues to register more than 300 daily Covid deaths, there has been no new reported Covid-19 deaths in China for more than six months. In this way, China is largely spared by the so-called long-Covid – new, returning or ongoing symptoms – which, according to a [Brookings report](#) in August, affect 16 million people of working age in the U.S. The extremely low levels of infection and mortality appear to evince the government’s “people first and life first” approach in Covid prevention and control.

Concerns about Human Rights and Civil Liberties

China’s ability to slow the virus nevertheless is achieved to the detriment of human rights and civil liberties. Zero-Covid policy has been imposed from the top-down without any institutionalized negotiation with the people who are directly affected by the policy. Like enforcement of birth control policy in the 1980s, enforcement of zero-Covid is largely backed up by coercive means, although the government also relies on propaganda to persuade people to buy its narrative on the need to sustain the policy structure. Snap lockdowns and the extensive use of AR codes and “the pop-up window” enable the government to restrict people’s mobility at will. People are forced to be tested regularly in order to access public transportation and other public venues. While infected people, no matter how mild their symptoms are, are immediately isolated and treated in designated hospitals, their close contacts and secondary close contacts are sent – often against their will – to designated places for 7-day quarantine. The human rights woes are often amplified with the application of “one-size-fits-all” and “cengceng jia ma” (i.e., the imposing of additional targets and requirements at every lower administrative level). After one Covid case is identified, residents in the entire building would be sent to quarantine centers.

In order to justify these draconian measures, the state and social media outlets have consistently highlighted the danger of Covid-19. The fear of being infected and suffering from its health and non-health consequences led to widespread stigmatization of infected people and their close contacts in China. A person who happens to be infected worries about not only the potential severe symptoms but also the harassment and cyberbullying associated with the leak of private information. Driven by the cronophobia, some Chinese companies publicly [reject](#) job seekers who recovered from Covid or had been quarantined. Early this month, fears about Covid and poor living conditions led to an exodus of workers from Foxconn in Zhengzhou, the world’s largest iPhone factory.

Violation of privacy and civil liberties is also exacerbated by the widespread use of invasive surveillance techniques to monitor and track people’s movements. While many liberal democracies, including the U.S., use virus tracking apps, and Chinese people appear to acquiesce to handing over personal data for pandemic control, the unprecedented use of such technologies by an untransparent authoritarian regime has led many China watchers to suspect that zero-Covid may provide a proof of concept for an Orwellian state seeking to control every aspect of social life in China. Already, the health code system has [enabled](#) the government to have combined access to personal information including people’s Covid test results, their mobile phone location tracking, their government issued ID number, and their vaccination status. The surveillance state is so omnipresent and efficient that a resident who just purchased anti-fever medicine from a local pharmacy could [receive a government notice](#) next day asking them to be tested for Covid.

Such concerns are not groundless. In June, local governments in Zhengzhou, Henan province [tampered](#) health codes of bank run victims turned protesters so that they were denied access to all public venues and transport and even subject to mandatory quarantine. Evidence also suggests that zero-Covid measures facilitated government crackdown on the nascent civil society. Under the guise of breaking up illegal gathering to prevent the spread of Covid, many religious venues are closed. While government sanctioned churches are allowed to reopen when zero-Covid measures ease up, most family churches continue to have difficulty holding worship services and prayer meetings.

How Zero-Covid Compromises People's Health and Wellbeing

Prolonged and stringent implementation of zero-Covid nationwide has also created other second-order problems. Lockdown measures, for example, impedes access to food, healthcare and other basic necessities. A study conducted by Chinese scientists [found](#) a significant decline of the utilization of healthcare services after lockdown measures were introduced in China. Chinese media reported a number of cases where people have died after being denied timely medical treatment for their non-Covid related illnesses. In cities under prolonged lockdowns, such as [Xi'an](#), [Shanghai](#), [Jilin](#) and [Urumqi](#), residents also face shortages of food and other basic necessities.

The impact on people's livelihood varies across population groups, exacerbating the problem of inequity. Migrant workers (approximately 292.5 million in China), low-income households and small businesses are hit particularly hard by the lockdown. Occasionally local governments [offered](#) them small loans and subsidies, which appeared to be too little and too late. According to [a nationwide survey](#), 60 percent of diabetes patients experienced food or medication shortages during the quarantine period in 2020 in China (which has the world's largest diabetes population – 116 million adults), which was much higher than those without diabetes.

By shielding the population from Covid-19, zero-Covid has the unintended result of sustaining [the immunity gap](#) between China and the rest of the world. No more than the small fraction of one percent of the Chinese population acquired some level of natural immunity due to prior infection. This places China in a [unique situation](#) of having only vaccine-induced immunity. Because of the low efficacy rate of Chinese vaccines, however, the antibodies generated by these vaccines have dropped to a level that is considered low or even undetectable. The immunity gap significantly increases the risks of the healthcare system being overwhelmed by a rapid surge of cases after policy relaxation, which paradoxically justifies the persistence of the zero-Covid policy regime.

Single-minded pursuit of Covid prevention and control also means that other major public health challenges receive less attention, which very likely increases the overall disease burden in China. It is increasingly clear that prolonged and stringent school closures and stay-at-home orders, in combination with the fear about Covid-19, have aggravated a mental health crisis in China. A national survey taken in 2020 [found](#) that 35 percent of respondents suffered from mental disorders including anxiety and depression. In addition, by discouraging and even denying people from accessing food, medicine and care for other illnesses, the policy is expected to contribute to growing non-communicable disease burden, including diabetes, heart attacks, stroke, and cancer, which are the leading killers in China. According to Peng Kaiping, dean of the School of Social Sciences at Tsinghua University, diabetes deaths have [increased](#) by 80 percent in China, where [840,000 people](#) died of diabetes annually before the pandemic. He also suggested that the harm to health caused by Covid-19 has been overshadowed by the second-order disasters associated with the stringent Covid control measures in China.

In addition, zero-Covid's devastating impact on China's economy is taking a heavy toll on people's livelihood. Over 460,000 Chinese firms were [closed](#) in the first quarter of 2022 alone. The widespread business failure might explain why youth unemployment rate is so high (close to 20 percent). The economic slowdown threatens to put working class and migrant workers at risk of falling back into poverty, which prompts the central government to [provide](#) one-time relief funding to "families or individuals whose basic life is in temporary difficulties due to the epidemic."

Conclusion

Mike Ryan, head of WHO's health emergencies program, once [said](#) that all pandemic control actions should "show due respect to individual and human rights." As far as human rights in China are concerned, there is a huge perception gap between China and the West. Critics of China's human rights tend to focus on individual political and civil liberties in the country, while the Chinese government prefers to talk only about the strides it has made in achieving collective social and economic rights, such as increased access to healthcare and elimination of absolute poverty. In appreciation of the equal status of both types of rights, this testimony acknowledges the huge efforts and achievements of China in shielding its 1.4 billion people from Covid-19 *and* the widespread encroachment on privacy and civil liberties in the country. In the meantime, it also suggests that the proclaimed people-first and life-first approach in combating Covid-19 should be evaluated in light of the lack of commitment to addressing other major public health challenges. Preliminary evidence seems to suggest that the extremely low level of Covid infection and mortality may be achieved to the detriment of people's overall health status, which undermines the government narrative on its human rights achievements. Moving away from zero-Covid is the only wise approach to transcend this human rights dilemma.