INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (ISIS) MALAYSIA

focus

ISIS Focus Special Edition - 1

THE CRISIS OF OUR TIME

Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia

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Contents

QUICKTAKE

COVID-19: Virus and Viral

The spread of the novel coronavirus, now known as COVID-19, has caused the latest health crisis with cases reported in 28 countries globally. The fear that emanates from the rising number of cases reported with each passing day is further compounded by the proliferation of misinformation about the subject. Malaysia is not immune to both the disease and the misinformation.

BY HARRIS ZAINUL, NURSALINA SALLEH AND MUHAMMAD SINATRA

A Brief Timeline

31 DEC
China notified WHO of pneumonia-like cases in Wuhan

7 JAN
The new virus was identified as 2019-nCoV by WHO

11 JAN
The first death from the virus was announced in China

13 JAN
The first case outside China was reported in Thailand

6 FEB
Malaysia confirmed its first locally-transmitted case of coronavirus

27 JAN
Malaysia stopped issuing visas for Chinese citizens from Wuhan city and Hubei province

24 JAN
Malaysia's Ministry of Health confirmed its first three cases, travelers who entered Johor from Singapore

20 JAN
More than 200 infection cases reported, majority of which were in China

10 FEB
Malaysia confirmed 18 cases in the counry

11 FEB
The announcement of a Malaysia-Singapore joint working group to curb the outbreak

12 FEB
The virus was officially renamed as COVID-19

Worldwide Statistics

445,104
Cases

20,485
Deaths

105,698
Recovered

170+ Affected countries

Months since the outbreak started **3**

17,200 Deaths outside Mainland China

Cases in Malaysia **1,796**

Source: *BBC, SCMP*

As of 25 March 2020

COVID-19 in Malaysia

Consider These

- There is no consensus yet that COVID-19 is airborne, according to Malaysia's Health Minister Datuk Seri Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad
- Wearing a mask does not make you impervious to the virus - wear it only if you are sick to prevent spreading virus to others
- As of 17 February 2020, 15 out of 22 patients with COVID-19 in Malaysia have recovered
- At this point, the mortality rate of COVID-19 stands between 2-4%, depending on the study. The mortality rate will change in future as data continue to be collected

Source: *Bernama, BBC, The Guardian*

How Has COVID-19 Affected Malaysia?

- Triggered a form of xenophobic and racist attitude among some quarters in the society
- Induced a degree of panic-buying of face masks and sanitisers
- Tested the government's ability to manage an international health crisis
- Revealed the society's susceptibility to the influence of misinformation and disinformation
- Demonstrated the society's inability to use social media appropriately

Expert Says...

Dr Khor Swee Kheng
Physician and Global Health Expert

1. Travel bans are not completely effective and efficient to impede the spread of COVID-19
2. Quarantines raise ethical issues as it could impinge on individual human rights for the sake of collective interest
3. The welfare of healthcare workers must be protected during the crisis
4. Decision makers may ignore science and could be pressured to submit to the demands of panicked citizens
5. Healthcare responses are still largely localised despite the global nature of COVID-19

Points derived from "The Science, Politics and Geopolitics of Coronavirus", 17 February 2020, ISIS Malaysia. Visit www.isis.org.my for slides and podcast of this presentation

Burning Questions

With the current trajectory, when will the spread of the COVID-19 peak, plateau and decline?

Considering what we know about the virus and its data are still being updated, what are the steps that need to be taken in the meantime and for the future?

What should be Malaysia's measures and policies to anticipate the uncertainty of the COVID-19 status in Indonesia?

As of 23 March 2020, the Royal Malaysian Police has opened investigation papers on at least 43 individuals for spreading **fake news and rumours** about COVID-19. We need to be aware that misinformation have **raised disproportionate alarm**, **spreading fear** among Malaysians

virus
that
went
viral

Misinformation We Have Seen

- Sources of the virus

- Coronavirus as a biological weapon

- Pseudoscience remedies

- Effects of the virus (eg. fatalities, vectors, etc.)

How to Protect Yourself from the Influence of Misinformation?

Identify Source

- General rule: Information from well-established media is more reliable than messages forwarded through WhatsApp and other social media applications
- Information from questionable sources usually contain formatting errors

Read to the End

- Do not stop at the headlines
- Read the full content to understand the context of the article

Who is Sharing?

- Check out the social media account that shares the information
- A verified account, especially one belonging to an expert in the subject matter, has more credibility than ordinary accounts

Check Before Sharing

- Ensure the accuracy of the information before sharing
- The "sharing just in case" attitude is not a good enough reason to share
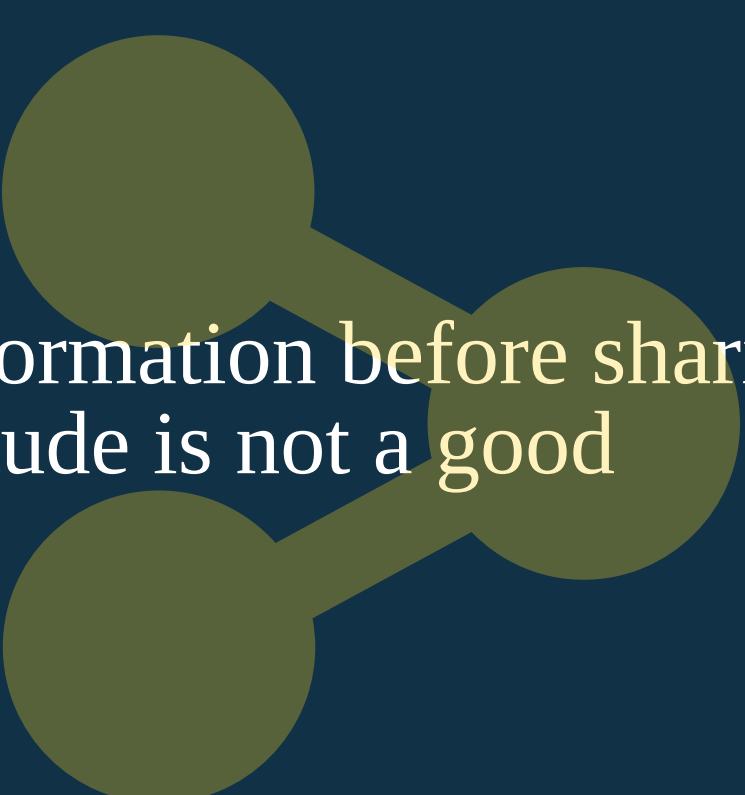
Consult These Accounts

For up-to-date developments and reliable information on COVID-19, you may refer to the following accounts:
- Ministry of Health Malaysia (@KKMPutrajaya)
- World Health Organisations (@WHO)

Use These Tools

- Check out the Sebenarnya.MY for a list of debunked fake news
- Try reverse searching an image by using Google Reverse Image, Yandex or TinEye to see if it apeared elsewhere before

Malaysia's Infodemic and Policy Response

The COVID-19 infodemic has shown that content needs to be regulated. The continued reliance on Section 505(b) of the Penal Code and Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 means continued exposure to risk of abuse. In light of this, what is the way forward towards the twin goals of addressing the infodemic and better protecting free speech?

BY HARRIS ZAINUL

False information and rumours thrive on fear and uncertainty. The COVID-19 pandemic offers plenty of both. Due to its novelty, room was created for both the unintentional and intentional spread of false information – known as misinformation and disinformation respectively. The proliferation of false information online has led the World Health Organisation to declare that there is now an "infodemic" – "an overabundance of information, some accurate and some not, that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it".

The proliferation of false information alongside outbreaks of diseases are nothing new. But as Renee Diresta, technical research manager at Stanford Internet Observatory has observed, the spread of false information following the COVID-19 outbreak can be differentiated with the Ebola and Zika outbreaks as the latter two were relatively confined geographically. This is contrasted with COVID-19, which at the time of writing affects 195 countries, making it the first truly global pandemic in the age of social media.

What this means is that false information created in one country experiencing COVID-19 could very well spread globally online. Permitting this is the frictionless nature of social media platforms which allow content to be published without moderation and fact-checking, preconditions that are associated with more formal publications. This allows false information to spread faster and wider than before.

Signalling the extent of this is that the CoronaVirusFacts / DatosCoronaVirus Alliance Database – which includes more than 100 fact-checkers around the world – has fact-checked more than 1,500 falsehoods surrounding COVID-19. Meanwhile hinting at the extent of the problem locally, as of 26 March 2020, there have been 187 debunks of COVID-19 false information on SEBENARNYA.MY, a fact-checking site under the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia Malaysia.

Worryingly is that despite a coalition of social media and technology giants – including Facebook, Google, LinkedIn, Microsoft, Reddit, Twitter, and YouTube – pledging to combat "fraud and misinformation about the virus", these efforts to remove false information would, by nature, only be after the fact the content has been published. This means that users could have already been exposed to false information.

Combining this with the infodemic's sheer volume suggests that even if the false information were to be taken down or fact-checked, users who have already repeatedly been exposed to the false information could continue believing in it due to the illusory truth effect. The illusory truth effect occurs when repeating a statement increases the belief that it's true even when the statement is actually false.

A further consideration that needs to be taken is how false information spreads not only on social media, but communication applications as well. For example, according to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) Internet Users Survey 2018, WhatsApp is the most popular communication application in Malaysia with 27.2 million users. With its end-to-end

encryption technology, efforts to identify and counter false information on WhatsApp and other communication applications pose a Herculean task.

To be sure, leaving health-related content unregulated is untenable. This is because the marketplace of ideas – where good ones are presumed to trump the bad – fails when the spread of false information exploits evolutionary biases in human cognition. These are the very same cognitive biases that explain why humans are more engaged with information on potential threats – as compared to other kinds of information – as it offers an advantage in keeping humans from danger, and consequently ensuring survival.

For example, considering how widespread COVID-19 is, it would be natural for those who are concerned to seek means to protect themselves, and/or remedies for the virus. As search results would be tainted by the infodemic, users could be exposed to false information potentially leading to a false sense of security, and in some cases, even death.

Additionally, content also needs to be regulated as false information during times of a health crisis can lead to excessive panic in the population. This can result in people flocking to supermarkets to panic buy groceries at the expense of vulnerable groups and the effectiveness of social distancing measures put in place.

But the larger danger posed by an untreated infodemic is a continuous pollution of the information environment which decays, devalues and delegitimises the voices of experts and authoritative institutions. This may result in lowered trust towards experts and institutions – such as those responsible for public health, which could negatively impact their legitimacy when implementing policies that

require whole-of-society buy-in such as movement control orders.

In response to the infodemic, as of 23 March 2020, there has been a total of 43 investigations for either "improper use of network facilities" under Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) 1998 or "statements conducive to public mischief" under Section 505(b) of the Penal Code. Of this amount, six individuals have been charged under Section 505(b) of the Penal Code, while five are being investigated and have had their statements recorded under Section 233 of the CMA 1998.

Several lawyers have come out in defence of the utilisation of Section 505(b) of the Penal Code to regulate the spread of misinformation pertaining to COVID-19. Among others, they argued that its provisions are more specific in its applicability, and requires satisfying the higher threshold of "affecting public tranquility", as opposed to the lower thresholds of the statement only needing to be intended to "annoy" under Section 233 of the CMA 1998, or only needing to be false under Section 4 of the now repealed Anti-Fake News Act (AFNA) 2018.

While this much is a given, it is also important to note that Section 505(b) of the Penal Code is not the panacea to cure the infodemic. With its provisions not requiring an element of falsehood, the provision could – theoretically – be applicable to cases whereby despite the statement being accurate and truthful, the maker of the statement could still be found guilty if the statement affects public tranquility. Here, it would not be far-fetched to argue – hypothetically – that Section 505(b) of the Penal Code can be abused to target journalists who break public interest stories, which by its very nature affects public tranquility.

That said, it needs to be admitted

that legislations are rarely perfect, and perfect should not be the enemy of good. It is undoubted that even the deeply flawed AFNA 2018 and Section 233 of the CMA 1998 would be helpful to address the infodemic today – what more "better" crafted legislation like Section 505(b) of the Penal Code. But that said, it is worth remembering that continued exposure to the risk of abuse is a huge price to pay in retaining such vaguely worded, broadly applicable legislation.

Considering policy options moving forward, the introduction of any new legislation to regulate content will inevitably raise concerns of censorship and its potential chilling effect on free speech. In assuaging those concerns, the government must avoid usage of genuine cases where speech needs to be regulated – as with now during the COVID-19 pandemic – as a fig leaf to justify far reaching intrusions on individual liberties.

That said, it needs to be underscored that the freedom of speech, as provided under the Article 10 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, is not limitless as derogations are permissible. This being the case, it does not mean that the government is granted carte blanche in limiting free speech, as any legislation needs to be for a legitimate objective, and measures taken must be proportionate to that objective – as required by the rule of law. This will ensure that free speech is safeguarded by curtailing it only to the extent absolutely necessary, while mitigating the chances of indirect censorship.

Further, by being clear on its objective and how it would apply, the proposed legislation will better achieve legal certainty – ensuring that the general public are better able to regulate their conduct accordingly. This is as any legislation should never be intended to solely prosecute, but rather also set norms of what is acceptable.

Section 233(1)(a) of the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 creates an offence for "a person who by means of any network facilities or network service or applications service knowingly: (i) makes, creates or solicits; and (ii) initiates the transmission of, any comment, request, suggestion or other communication which is obscene, indecent, false, menacing or offensive in character with intent to annoy, abuse, threaten or harass another person. A person who commits an offence under this section shall, on conviction, be liable to a fine not exceeding fifty thousand ringgit or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding one year or to both and shall also be liable to a further fine of one thousand ringgit for every day during which the offence is continued after conviction."

Section 505(b) of the Penal Code creates an offence for "whoever makes, publishes or circulates any statement, rumour or report with intent to cause, or which his likely to cause, fear or alarm to the public, or to any section of the public where by any person may be induced to commit an offence against the State or against the public tranquillity shall be punished with imprisonment which may extend to two years or with fine or with both."

Article 10(2)(a) of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia sets out that derogations from the freedom of speech can be made in eight areas, "in the interest of the security of the Federation, friendly relations with other countries, public order or morality and restrictions designed to protect the privileges of Parliament, provide against contempt of court, defamation, and incitement of any offence."

Section 233 of the CMA 1998 and Section 505(b) of the Penal Code, which are currently being used to prosecute those who spread false information and rumours, fail to satisfactorily achieve the latter. This is as they do not communicate clearly the kinds of content that are unacceptable beyond vague and broad concepts like "affecting public tranquility" and intended to "annoy" – which leaves the public unable to regulate their conduct accordingly.

Moreover, there needs to be an avoidance of simplistic thinking in diagnosing the problem. One example of such thinking is that the infodemic is caused by the lack of stringent regulations.Proponents of this line of thought argue that stringent regulations are required to deter people from creating and sharing false content. While appealing to common sense, Nagin suggests that "certainty of apprehension, not the severity of the ensuing legal consequence, is the more effective deterrent". This makes an important point to appreciate, that heavier punishments are not the end all, be all to address the infodemic.

As certainty of apprehension plays an important factor in creating an effective deterrent, it is crucial that any proposed legislation to regulate false information is complemented with technical expertise to identify, track and detain the creators and sharers of disinformation. With regards to this, it needs to be underscored that those who are truly motivated to create disinformation and cause harm could potentially be hiding their true identities through sock-puppet social media accounts, or by utilising off the shelf virtual private networks (VPNs), or even conduct their operations from other jurisdictions putting Malaysian legislations out of reach.

On the latter, even if the proposed legislation contains provisions for extraterritorial applicability, the probability of the other country rendering mutual legal assistance for investigation and extradition is easier said than done.

Lastly, the government must also resist calls from certain quarters of society, including former de facto Law Minister Azalina

Othman, to reinstate the repealed AFNA 2018. This, they argue, would act as a vanguard against the spread of false information. Here, it is worth remembering that the repealed Act was incredibly vague in its definition, and disproportionately broad in its applicability — flying in the face of even the most liberal of readings of basic free speech standards.

The current pandemic has highlighted the clear need to address the health-related infodemic. Maintaining the current set of legislations – while convenient now to address the misinformation and disinformation associated with COVID-19 – would mean continued exposure to the risk of abuse, while a wholesale repeal would create a lacuna in the law.

As scientists are now warning that the COVID-19 pandemic would be a protracted affair leading to new normals – the introduction of a new punitive legislation to regulate COVID-19 false information is needed. To that end, in ensuring that free speech rights are curtailed only to the extent absolutely necessary, the proposed legislation needs to be specific in its objective; towards assuaging concerns of censorship, the legislation needs to be clear in its applicability, and; to prevent unjust repercussions, the sentencing must be proportionate to the crime.

Policymakers need to introduce a punitive legislation, applicable to all mediums – including social media and communication applications – that specifies the types of false information that are unacceptable during the COVID-19 pandemic. This will have the simultaneous effects of educating the public who will then be better able to regulate themselves, sending a coercive signal to would-be offenders, and reducing the risk of abuse.

Further to that, the proposed legislation should also only apply

to COVID-19 related disinformation (the intentional creation and/or spread of false information) that causes actual harm. What this means for the proposed legislation is that it should be insufficient for guilt to be established based solely on content being false in nature, but it must also be intentional, and be proven to have, or is reasonably likely to cause harm. With that, only those who are intentionally creating and sharing false information to cause harm will be prosecuted, while the honestly mistaken will not.

To that objective, the proposed legislation should apply to:

- Disinformation on the spread of COVID-19 that incites panic;
- Disinformation meant to influence people into acting against recommended practices set out by health authorities;
- Disinformation on non-scientifically proven remedies for COVID-19; and
- Disinformation on the basis of impersonating authorities.

In determining punishment, proportionality – a general principle in criminal law used to convey the idea that the severity of the punishment of an offender should fit the seriousness of the crime – needs to be by design, and not left to chance. Towards that end, when determining punishment, the following must be taken into account:

- To what extent was harm caused, or reasonably likely to have caused due to the disinformation;
- How widespread was the disinformation;
- Was the creator and/or sharer of the disinformation a figure of authority, or was impersonating a figure of authority;
- Was the creator and/or sharer of the disinformation part of a larger coordinated group;

- What was the general context in which the disinformation was created and/or shared; for example, false informationshared during a pandemic causes, or could reasonably cause more harm than it would during ordinary times.

As laid out above, the proposed legislation that is specific in its objective, clear in its applicability, and proportionate in its punishments can satisfactorily meet the goal of addressing the ongoing COVID-19 infodemic, while striking a better balance with free speech rights. Further, with a more specific legislation to regulate COVID-19 false information, the government will communicate unequivocally the kinds of content on COVID-19 that are unacceptable, allowing the public to better regulate their conduct.

While acknowledging the relative "advantages" of vague and/or broad legislations like Section 233 of the CMA 1998 and Section 505(b) of the Penal Code – it needs to be emphasised that despite "drastic times calling for drastic measures", it does not, and should not grant government carte blanche to intrude on, or steamroll over individual liberties. This would not only contradict the spirit of the constitutionally-guaranteed freedom of speech, but also take advantage of the people who would most likely choose immediate interests such as health and safety over more abstract concepts like free speech.

Further, as the proposed legislation would only be applicable to disinformation, and not misinformation, the risk of making criminals out of the uninformed will be greatly mitigated. This distinction is important as it would better acknowledge how at these uncertain times, the public is primed, due to evolutionary biases, to crave and share information that could protect themselves and/or be beneficial for survival – even ones that are not scientifically proven.

That said, any punitive legislation – whether existing or being proposed – needs to go hand-in-hand with other measures to build society's resilience to the infodemic. These measures should include introducing government oversight on social media platforms, increasing the public's digital literacy skills, and ultimately clear, consistent, and transparent communication from the government.

As Yuval Noah Hariri opined, "harsh punishments aren't the only way to make people comply with beneficial guidelines. When people are told the scientific facts, and when people trust public authorities to tell them these facts, citizens can do the right thing even without a Big Brother watching over their shoulders. A self-motivated and well-informed population is usually far more powerful and effective than a policed, ignorant population".

While on one hand this much is true, on the other hand is that with movement control seemingly becoming the new normal, meaning more people will spend more time indoors and online, the need for punitive legislation should not be downplayed. It should, however, as the proposed legislation makes clear, be reserved – by design – for those who intentionally cause harm by creating and sharing disinformation.

Harris Zainul is Analyst in Economics, Trade and Regional Integration (ETRI), ISIS Malaysia

The Other Victims of the Coronavirus: Multilateralism and Regional Cooperation

Economies, travel, healthcare systems, communities and lives are not the only wreckage that COVID-19 is leaving in its wake. Predictably, the virus has begun to exacerbate cracks in the existing international multilateral system.

BY THOMAS DANIEL

The stresses brought about by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has caused tensions within global and regional architectures and mechanisms. Some of this can be attributed to systemic flaws underpinning the international system. But it is the action – or lack thereof by political leaders, elected or otherwise – that have aggravated these fissures. There should have been decisive, reassuring leadership, and international cooperation for a cohesive, integrated response.

Instead, we got impositions of sudden unilateral travel bans without consultations,denials on the severity of the situation against mounting evidence tothe contrary, a lack of any clear strategy or communication plan to manage both the outbreak and the resulting inevitable social panic, and dog whistling to deflect blame.

Worryingly, the two global powers that hold much sway over the global architecture are falling short of the responsibilities that come with their position.

The Trump administration's handling of this health crisis thus far, both at home and abroad, is a total and utter mess. The insistence of the Presidentand his political allies to blame China for their policy missteps is deeply troubling. A decentralised and profit-oriented health system without universal coverage has left many Americans, especially those who cannot afford it, extremely vulnerable.

The report on the Administration attempting to secure exclusive rights to a potential coronavirus vaccine by a German pharmaceutical company will surely be one of the more sordid
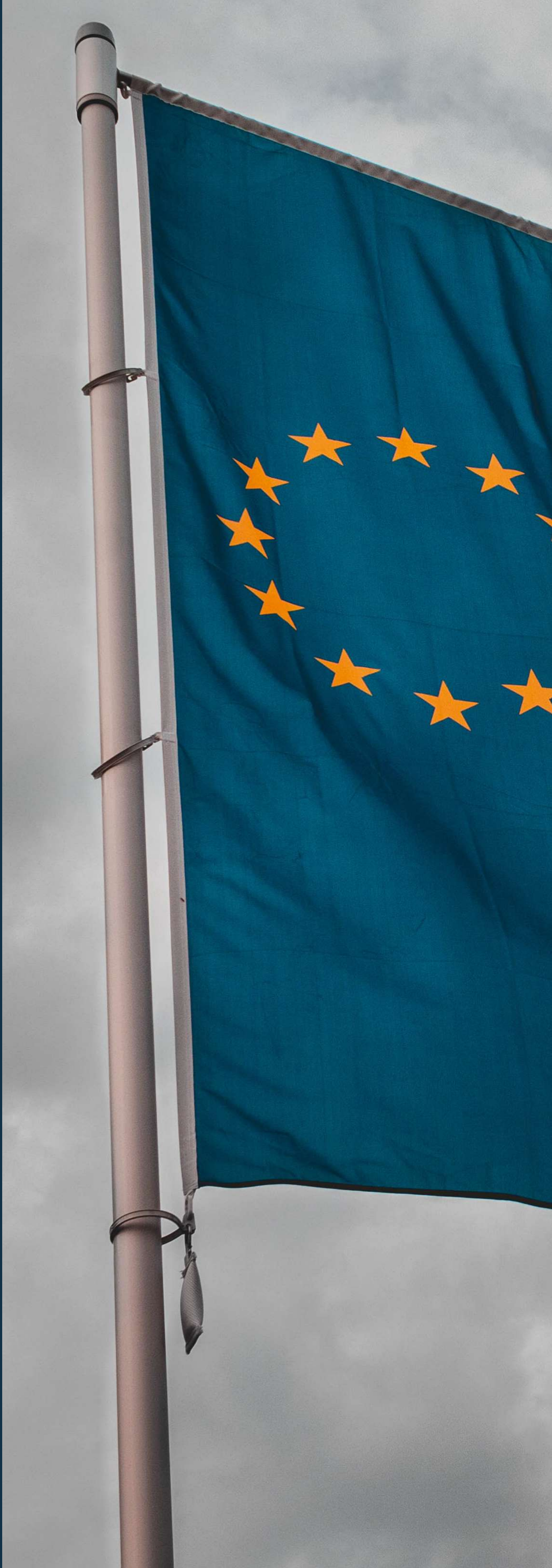
highlights of this still ongoing saga.

China is basking in praise for its strict containment and whole-of-society approach in fighting the virus, along with its ability to quickly and publicly deliver aid to other affected countries. However, it also seems to be engaged in another equally concentrated whole-of-society approach to blame some nefarious American plot as the cause of the virus. Nevermind that it was the sheer opacity of China's governance system that caused the virus to spread until it couldn't be covered up anymore. Or that punitive measures were taken against whistle-blowers. Or that one of the reasons it can afford to now distribute aid is that it bought up vast amounts of medical stockpiles at the start of the outbreak, depleting them from other countries when the outbreak eventually reached their shores.

"Regional organisations too are having a tough go at it."

The European Union (EU) is scrambling to come up with a joint response to COVID-19 as it finds itself in the frontlines of the fight. Previous attempts bore little fruit as members continued to enforce their own measures, often with little consultation with each other. Enforced curfews and quarantines are in place in the worst hit countries, while some members are reintroducing ID-checks inside the Schengen Area.

While it is premature to claim that the EU and regional solidarity will be frayed beyond repair because of this crisis, it certainly does not make things easier. Careful management of bilateral relations and aid is necessary. Once this pandemic subsides, those seeking to ride populist sentiments will try and capitalise on the severe trauma that it has inflicted.

Would we see another resurgence in popular support for the

Eurosceptic *Lega Nord* in Italy, for example, which is facing huge numbers of infections and deaths, and whose initial desperate calls for aid was largely ignored by its EU partners?

Here in Southeast Asia, ASEAN Member States have been working remotely with each other, sharing updated information on surveillance and containment, laboratory diagnosis and treatments. There have also been exchanges on disruptive travel restrictions and non-pharmaceutical interventions. Nevertheless, there has yet to be any public cohesive strategy to manage this pandemic, and responses at the regional level seem to be more reactionary rather than proactive.

Certainly, there are multiple ASEAN ministerial and senior official mechanisms in place – disaster management, health, labour movement, and the Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance – which can be comprehensively mobilised. Even the relatively obscure Cooperation on Civil Service Matters platform has a role here.

Nationally, some countries in the region are clearly doing better than others. But as epidemiologists have emphasised, unless there is a concentrated regional effort to contain and minimise the spread of this virus, national efforts might ultimately count for naught. Once this pandemic has passed, there needs to be a thorough post-mortem of what worked and what didn't at all levels – national, regional and international – to prepare for the next global crisis. Not just in terms of managing the pandemic, but also its impact on international and regional mechanisms, architectures and systems, and how they reacted.

To allow such an opportunity to take a long hard and honest look at ourselves to pass us by after all

this, would be not only irresponsible and criminal, but possibly suicidal.

2020: ASEAN's *Annus Horribilis*?

BY ZARINA ZAINUDDIN AND MUHAMMAD SINATRA

Southeast Asian states may finally claim something they have in common – all have reported cases of COVID-19 infection within their borders. Even this, however, has failed to rally the states to cooperate closer against the pandemic.

Southeast Asia might be facing its greatest external challenge since the foundation of ASEAN. Interestingly, it did not emanate from the longstanding major power competition, or disputes and disunity between member states – as many have predicted recently.

The weight of the COVID-19 challenge is taking its toll on ASEAN Member States (AMS). As of 27 March 2020, over 5700 cases and 170 deaths have been reported with the recovery rate standing around 10 percent across the region.

The dramatic worsening of the pandemic in Southeast Asia over the past few weeks have forced AMS to impose drastic measures. Due to the varying degrees of threat severity, however, both governments and their citizens have responded differently.

Using the WHO-devised three-pronged comprehensive approach as a standard, we can clearly see where these points of difference lie.

First, we have movement restriction orders. There is a wide range of restriction measures imposed by AMS, spanning from a national lockdown, to a partial lockdown, to no lockdown and to travel bans.

The second prong is testing with AMS differing in terms of testing volume.

Indonesia, ASEAN's most populated country, had only tested 2,863 individuals by 26 March 2020, despite its frighteningly high mortality rate and steady increase of positive cases. On the other hand, Malaysia with its highest infection case region-wise, has pledged to exponentially increase the number of testing following the emergence of a second wave of infection. Singapore, meanwhile, has engaged in aggressive testing and this has helped limiting the spread of infection.

The attitudes and behaviour of citizens' is the third element. While "work from home" and social distancing seem to be observed by citizens in some areas; others remain ignorant, or worse, stubborn. The spread of disinformation is also notable during this period, with 43 people being investigated for disseminating fake news in Malaysia alone. The mass gathering in Seri Petaling mosque was also an evidence of citizens from across ASEAN not taking the looming danger of COVID-19 seriously, despite previous warnings.

Figure 1 summarises the general situation and impact of COVID-19 in all AMS as of 27 March 2020.

At the time of writing, it appears that ASEAN countries are divided into two tiers. Those in the top five recorded over 500 cases each, while less than 150 cases were logged in each of the bottom five. Deaths are also registered in the top five countries, contrary to the situation in the bottom five, which have seen no deaths.

Despite this, some have raised questions over the validity of data in Laos, Myanmar and Indonesia, where cases tend to be underreported due to lack of medical capacity and other socio-political factors.

We also see that worst-affected

No	Country	Cases	Deaths	Recoveries	Policies/Actions taken
1	Malaysia	2,031	24	215	Imposing a nation-wide lockdown; banning international travel; shutting down all but essential services and operation; accelerating rapid testing; injecting economic stimulus;
2	Indonesia	893	78	35	Declaring a state of emergency; banning international travel; encouraging physical distancing; encouraging work from home; cancelling mass gatherings; closing public places; accelerating rapid testing; injecting economic stimulus; converting establishments to medical facilities; etc.
3	Singapore	683	2	172	Increasing travel barriers; imposing movement restriction measures; encouraging work from home; ceasing port call from cruise vessels; suspending most flights operated by Singapore Airlines
4	Thailand	1,045	4	88	Declaring a state of emergency; closing public places; increasing travel barriers to certain nationalities; closing land borders; dictating a shutdown of the economy with exceptions; injecting economic stimulus
5	The Philippines	707	45	28	Imposing a partial lockdown; cancelling all domestic flights; suspending stock market, bond and currency trading; suspending the issuance of visa
6	Vietnam	148	0	17	Increasing travel barriers to certain nationalities; suspending all international flights for Vietnam Air; suspending all domestic flights; dictating the closure of restaurants in Ho Chi Minh City
7	Brunei Darussalam	114	0	5	Increasing travel barriers to certain nationality; banning international travels to its citizens and foreign residents in the country
8	Cambodia	96	0	10	Banning international travel to certain nationalities; closing schools in Phnom Penh
9	Laos	6	0	0	Closing golden triangle borders with Myanmar and China; suspending all flights from China
10	Myanmar	5	0	0	Increasing travel barriers to certain nationality; imposing quarantine on those returning from abroad; conducting health checks along its border with China; allocating fund to purchase medical necessities

Fig. 1 Correct as of 27 March 2020, 03.00 pm; from various sources

countries are implementing more severe and comprehensive policies including movement restriction, declarations of emergency and economic stimulus. Their effectiveness are yet to be seen however, especially if this pandemic is prolonged. On top of that, countries that have not imposed movement restriction measures must also brace the potential of a second wave of infection.

As the threat is still developing and policies among countries differ, it seems that the only clear thing right now is that many things remain unclear. Thus, how ASEAN as a whole fares through this pandemic is a question worth pondering on, as the region is only as strong as its weakest link in this unprecedented struggle.

Moreover, the prospect of closer cooperation is unclear as AMS are prioritising domestic imperatives over joint, regional responses in dealing with the pandemic. This risks countries missing out on greater sharing of information, coordination of policies, best practices and strategic options undertaken by their own neighbours even as

they search for options from outside the region.

So where has ASEAN been in all this? On the positive side, there have been meetings among ASEAN economic, foreign and defence ministers and senior officials to ensure the stability of supply chains, enhance a regional response and defence cooperation during this crisis. The latest meeting of senior health officials, for example was conducted on 13 March 2020 to discuss containment strategies, healthcare facilities, travel restrictions and social distancing measures, among others.

Despite this, information on the follow-ups to these meetings, or whether they bore tangible results, is scant. It seems ASEAN's conundrum of perceived irrelevance for the people continues to haunt it even in this pandemic.

Questions abound, for example, as to why test kits are still lacking to some despite Vietnam's capability of producing. Additionally, Vietnam and Singapore's experience to suppress the number of infections is a lesson that other AMS should be familiar with by now.

As all AMS grapple with individual problems, ASEAN's future meetings on COVID-19 should emphasise on learning each other's best practices. This is not only to improve the response capabilities of each country, but also to avoid mistakes of one country being repeated by another.

While ASEAN has attempted to provide the latest updates of each AMS, it needs to improve its communication capacity and more importantly, presence. A dedicated COVID-19 page, which contains some very useful data, is not prominently highlighted on ASEAN's main page and its social media, thus raising our curiosity on ASEAN's commitment.

Making its website more user-friendly allows greater access to the wealth of information it hosts, in addition to disseminating more vital information on its social media platforms beyond the usual celebration of ASEAN diversity.

It seems that the pandemic has exposed some of ASEAN's long-standing weaknesses. Nevertheless, ASEAN also has an opportunity to act here, if it recognises this weakness and makes the necessary improvements.

Lessons from this pandemic must be translated into effective measures to better handle future crises. Among measures that merit consideration are stockpiling medicine and medical equipment. Creation of a rapid response team or expansion of ASEAN's AHA Centre is another possibility. Another possible measure is the creation of specific funds to deal with health crises that would assist countries with crisis containment efforts or economic assistance/recovery programmes.

Cooperation that took place during this pandemic should be further strengthened and even institutionalised, such as the evacuation of citizens from Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia from Iran by Malaysian government. Other examples include the assistance extended by the Singaporean government towards Malaysian workers in providing temporary housing, the close level of coordination among the Malaysian and Singaporean Ministries of Health and the creation of a comprehensive joint working group between the two neighbours to manage the pandemic and its fallout.

It is never too early to look ahead. As history has shown, invention and innovation flourished in hard times. During this pandemic, social distancing necessitates better use of

technology such as e-learning, online shopping, food delivery, telemedicine, "ninja robots", drones and 3D printing, among others. These are the industries that AMS could collectively nurture under ASEAN's economic pillar through cooperation between public and private sectors as well as to create an environment that is conducive for their growth. These industries will not only be the future engine of growth but will enhance the capabilities of AMS to be better prepared in the event of future calamities.

With lockdowns and travel bans in place in several AMS, the COVID-19 crisis has probably become the gravest threat to ASEAN's spirit of connectivity. The success or failures of the organisation to contribute in crisis management and relief will speak volumes towards the organisation's relevance, which many of its supporters and detractors are keen to comment about once the virus vanishes.
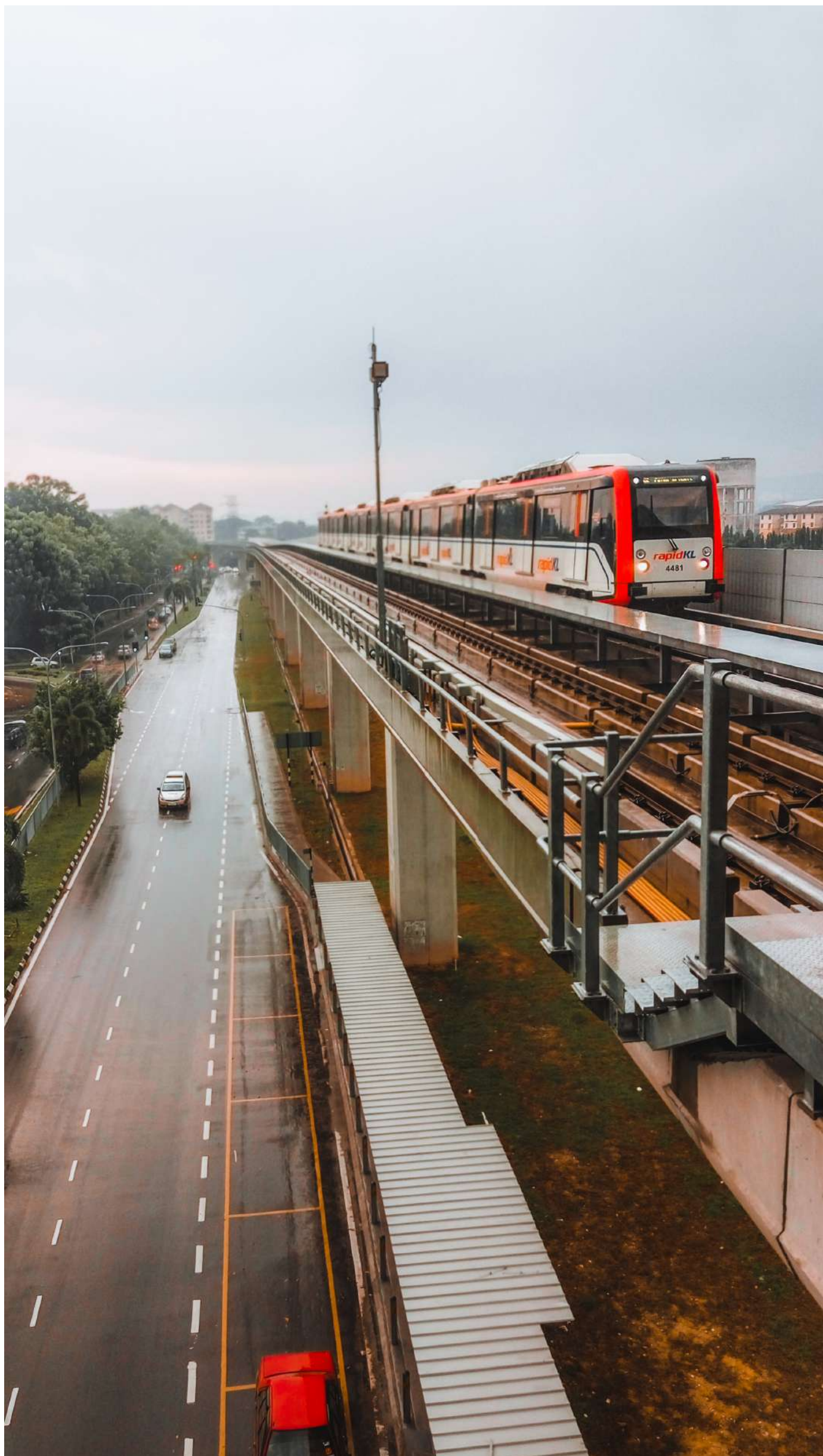
Zarina Zainuddin and Muhammad Sinatra are Analysts in Foreign Policy and Security Studies (FPSS), ISIS Malaysia
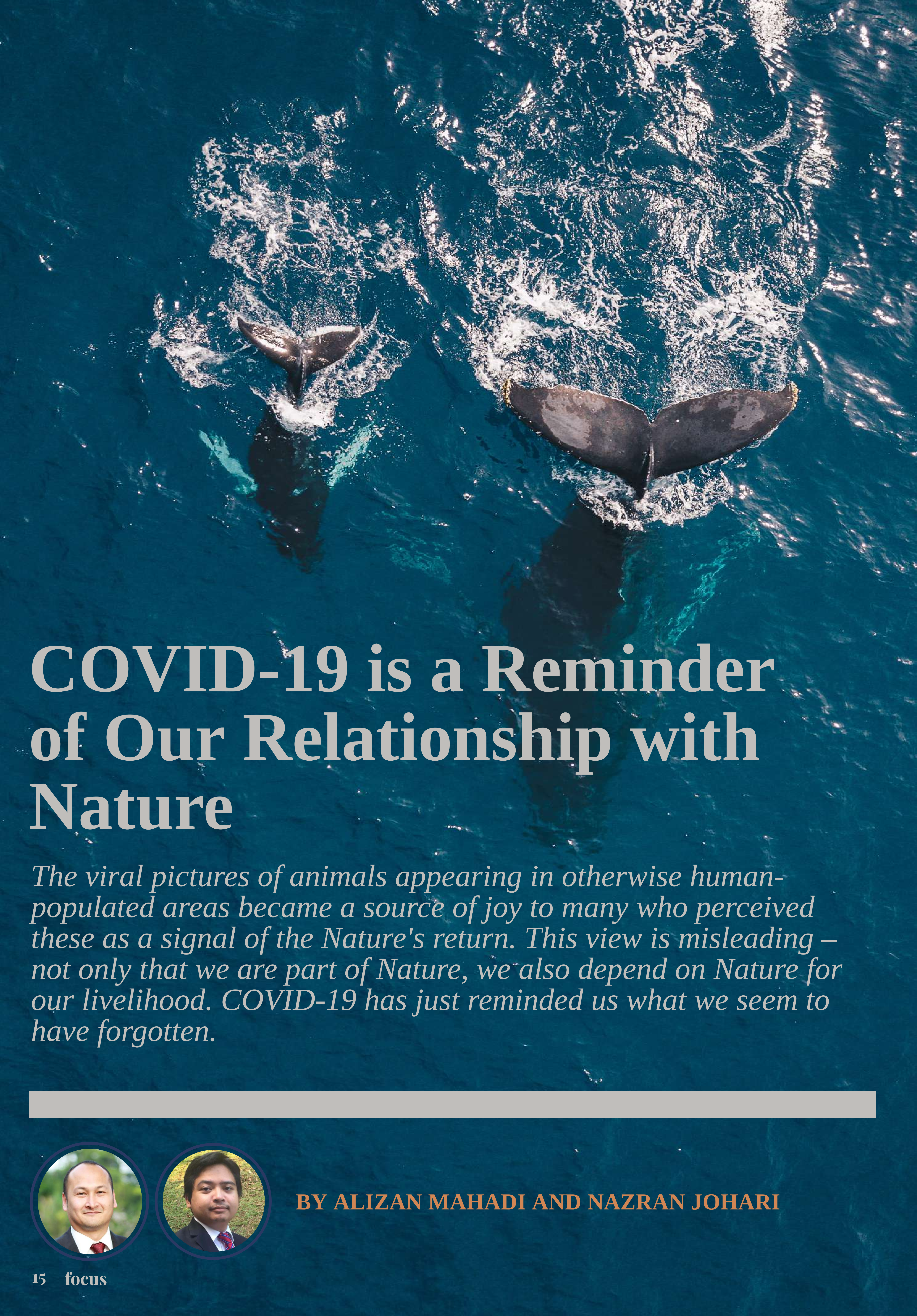
COVID-19 is a Reminder of Our Relationship with Nature

The viral pictures of animals appearing in otherwise human-populated areas became a source of joy to many who perceived these as a signal of the Nature's return. This view is misleading – not only that we are part of Nature, we also depend on Nature for our livelihood. COVID-19 has just reminded us what we seem to have forgotten.

BY ALIZAN MAHADI AND NAZRAN JOHARI

One of the few pieces of seemingly good news to come out in these troubling times is what might be called the return of Nature.

Many on social media worldwide were joyous when pictures of dolphins swimming in the canals of Venice and drunken elephants in China appeared.

These two specific stories sadly turned out to be fake news. Nonetheless, there were indeed heart-warming real news when sika deers were seen on the streets of Nara in Japan and raccoons showed up in numbers on the beaches of Panama.

As promising as these stories are, they do not, however, signal the return of Nature.

Ecosystems change over time in a slow ecological process rather than a single event. The partial shutdowns across the world will not be capable of restoring ecosystems, habitats and Nature at large.

More importantly, if any lesson is to be learned on Nature and the environment during the Covid-19 crisis, it is not so much the potential return of Nature, but a reminder that we are, in fact, a part of Nature.

Also that we rely on Nature for our livelihoods.

Firstly, it is important to note that most experts agree that the coronavirus currently sweeping the world is zoonotic, an infectious disease that is spread by animals to humans.

A recent report by the BBC highlighted that scientists found that Malayan pangolins carry viruses closely related to the COVID-19.

If true, this points to the consequences of wildlife trade not only to animals, but also to human health.

Since 2016, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) banned the international trade of pangolins.

Nonetheless, pangolins continue to be smuggled into countries such as China, where their meat being sold for consumption and medicine.

Secondly, while Nature may not return to its original form, the control of movements in various countries will likely result in reduction of pollution and emissions.

"A major environmental consequence of the current outbreak is the impact it has had on air quality worldwide."

Northern Italy and China, which have both been deemed as epicentres of the outbreak at one time or another, have shown dramatic reductions in concentrations of nitrogen dioxide, otherwise known as NO2, a major pollutant emitted from cars, trucks and motorcycles, among others.

According to NASA, NO2 in eastern and central China have been 10-30 percent lower than normal, while in Milan, average concentrations of NO2 for the past four weeks have been at least 24 percent lower than four weeks earlier this year, according to the European Environment Agency.

The reductions seen in these locations, where strict measures have been imposed to curb the escalation of cases, suggests that Malaysia will also experience a decline of NO2 during the period of the movement control order (MCO) and likely past that as

Malaysians opt to stay or work from home until the pandemic is well and truly over.

On the major topic of climate change, major reductions in CO2 emissions have already been seen.

Taking the example of just China, an analysis carried out by the climate website Carbon Brief found that in a two-week period there had been a 25 percent drop in energy use and emissions in China which would likely lead to an overall fall of around one percent in the country this year.

With drastic measures to curb movement being seen all over the world – especially in urban areas – and the astonishing depletion of the aviation industry, carbon emission levels everywhere, including Malaysia will continue to see a degree of reduction.

The reduction of pollution will result in cleaner air to breathe and benefits to our health and livelihoods.

In terms of climate change, while the reduction of carbon emissions during this period is not sufficient to ensure a climate-proof future, it can provide clues of how a lower carbon society can operate with less dependence on fossil fuels.

COVID-19 has once again acted as a reminder between the important links between our well-being and Nature.

Moving forward, Malaysia's responses to this crisis will determine how we can be more proactive to either prevent or face future environment-related incidents.

Firstly, is the need to have stronger enforcement on illegal wildlife trade.

Various reports have highlighted Malaysia's role as both a source and hub for internationally trafficked wildlife.

Pangolins, in particular, have often been attributed to Malaysia;

in February last year, 30,000 kilogrammes of pangolins were seized in Sabah.

While these seizures demonstrate successful enforcement, it also indicates the scale of the operations and the need to strengthen the enforcement and clamp down on the illegal networks operating to support it.

Secondly, Malaysia as with many other countries is planning to try and rescue their economies by spending significantly high amounts in their respective stimulus packages.

But these packages are unlikely to have climate change and the environment on their agenda or as a priority but will most likely focus on short-term measures.

Furthermore, the struggles the private sector are also facing may lead to a lack of investment in green technologies in the coming years as companies try to recover from this disastrous period.

While the focus on the short term is understandable, these two points taken together would mean a serious setback for the battle to preserve Nature and

risk future incidents that will amplify the crisis rather than resolve it.

This crisis should be a starting point to understand the relationship between the economy and the environment and how the imbalance in the first place caused the crisis.

Thirdly, is to heed scientific advice. Prominent scientist and the founding chair of United Nation's Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), Tan Sri Zakri Abdul Hamid, in a recent article in the *New Straits Times*, pointed out that a 2019 report by IPBES already warned of such an incident, linking emerging infectious diseases in wildlife with human activities.

More directly, back in 2007, a research paper by the University of Hong Kong (Cheng et al. 2007) warned that "the presence of a large reservoir of SARS-CoV-like viruses in horseshoe bats, together with the culture of of eating exotic mammals in southern China, is a time bomb."

Yet, trade in wildlife animals and consumption of their

meat continued.

There are no doubts that the COVID-19 pandemic has had consequences, for better and worse, for the environment.

The main question is how long lasting and significant these effects will be and whether it will turn out to be a wake-up call in understanding our relationship with Nature and the actions required to ensure sustainable development.

Arguments will be made that this is a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic, and long-term action such as on climate change and wildlife trade may not take priority alongside rescuing the short-term economy. If so, we would have lost an opportunity to progress towards a more resilient and sustainable model of development.

QUICKTAKE

COVID-19: Malaysia's Movement Control Order

Given the recent spike of the COVID-19 cases in Malaysia, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin announced a Movement Control Order for the entire country on 16 March 2020. This measure is dissimilar to a full lockdown that has been imposed earlier in other countries. The idea is to limit activities so as to limit our movements and, therefore, contact with one another, i.e. a strict implementation of social distancing.

BY PUTERI NOR ARIANE YASMIN, ZARINA ZAINUDDIN, T. ILISHA AMEERA AND MUHAMMAD SINATRA
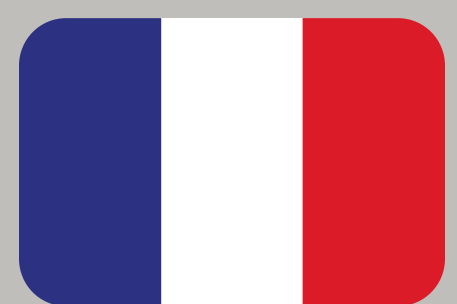
Countries/Regions on Lockdown
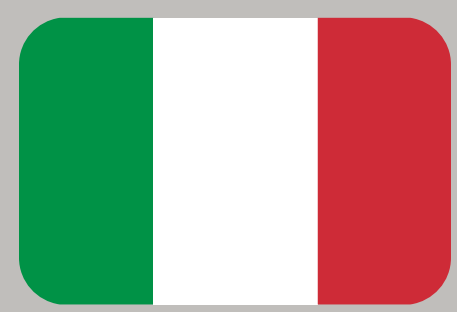
Italy

Spain

France

Hubei, China

Types of Movement Restriction Measures

Full lockdown

Depending on the country, hospitals and essential agencies will remain open; restaurants and grocery stores will open for a limited time

Partial lockdown

Ranges from an outright or limited ban on public gatherings to closures of institutions, such as schools and offices

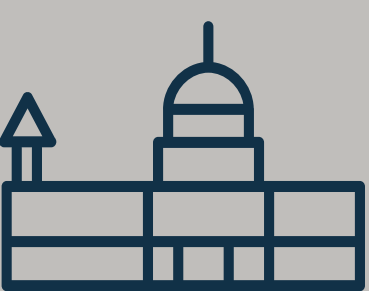## High-Risk Places

Cinemas

Gyms

Public Transportation

Places of Worship

Source: *Bloomberg, New Straits Times*

The Order Entails:

Partial government and public closures (except for those in essential services and shops that deal with daily necessities)

Closure of schools and universities

Travel restrictions for both Malaysians and foreigners, with returning Malaysians to self-quarantine for 14 days (now extended until 14 April 2020)

A total ban on all mass gatherings, including religious activities

Numbers in Malaysia

2,161 Reported Cases

259 Recovered

26 Deaths

Source: *The Star, Malaysiakini*, moh.gov.my (28 March 2020)

COMPLY! This Order requires our cooperation for it to work

PREVENT! Do not spread COVID-19 disinformation

KEEP GOING! Sentiasa bertenang dan teruskan kehidupan

Economic

- **Panic-buying**: Reduces the number of supplies, thus possibly increasing the price of goods
- **Fear**: Of possible loss of income and/or jobs in this economic environment (from migrant workers to the B40 class to the middle-income group)

Social

- **Ignorance and Non-compliance**: Individuals are unable or unwilling to fully grasp the importance of undertaking social distancing
- **Frustration**: Mental well-being could be affected, especially if questions remain unanswered
- **Paranoia**: The Order may be seen as a worsening of the situation in Malaysia rather than a preventive measure

Security

- **Contact Tracing**: Difficulties in tracing individuals who might have been exposed to or contracted COVID-19 from large gatherings
- **Lack of Testing Kits**: Testing kits are expensive to acquire and the availability of those that are free-of-charge could be limited
- **Undocumented Workers**: The religious gathering in Sri Petaling has highlighted the importance of regularising the undocumented within our borders for tracing purposes

Political

- **Political Ramifications**: The partial restriction on the economy could be misconstrued as the new government's inability to manage the situation
- **Public Perception**: The government must manage its narrative on COVID-19 and its response to maintain public order and stability

Will there be travel restrictions between West and East Malaysia?

Are there specific restrictions for sea and land travels between Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries?

What are the penalties for not complying with the Order?

Are there currently curfews in place?

How are businesses, supply chains and manufacturing affected?

Will measures be implemented to prevent hoarding or panic-buying?

QUICKTAKE | Movement Control Order: An Analysis

Despite panic buying and travelling, the overarching anxiousness and fears over COVID-19 are somewhat fleeting and momentary. The prevailing attitude is that of non-chalance. It remains unclear whether the public is fully aware of the severity of the current situation.

BY PUTERI NOR ARIANE YASMIN, T. ILISHA AMEERA AND MUHAMMAD SINATRA

Increased Exposure to COVID-19

Panic-Buying

Large queues in supermarkets

Low supply of goods
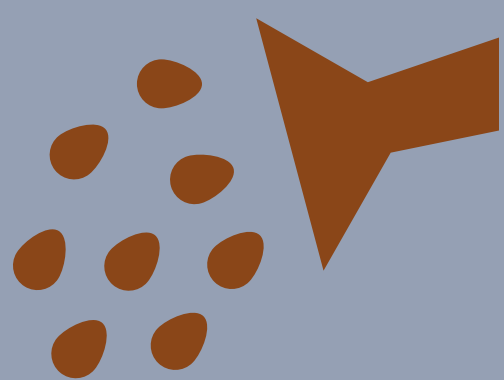
Panic-Travelling

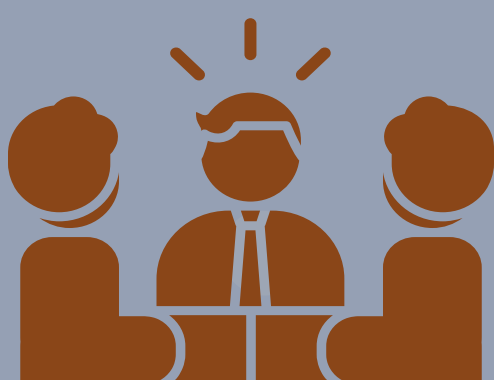Sudden announcements on interstate travel restrictions

Ill-prepared implementation of travel restrictions

Fuel to the Fire...

Water Disruption

Rumours of water disruption in Klang Valley

Politicking

Disunity during crisis

Conflicting Narratives

Inconsistent directions from key agencies

Resulting in...

1 Paranoia   2 Anxiousness   3 Confusion

Day 1: Non-compliance and Inconsistencies?

Both the *rakyat* and the *kerajaan* are not sufficiently adhering to the Order

Rakyat

- Lack of awareness on the severity of COVID-19
- Fear of financial losses is greater than the fear of COVID-19
- Business premises, such as restaurants, remain open (e.g. in Georgetown, Cheras, Subang Jaya and Sibu)
- Despite closures, people are seen exercising in community parks; people are interpreting the Order as a holiday

- Not strictly implementing the Order (e.g. social distancing is not practised adequately)
- Conflicting directives have led to unintentional movements and mass gatherings (e.g. at police stations and Terminal Bersepadu Selatan)
- Delays in communication (e.g. on travel restrictions for Malaysian employees in Singapore and interstate travels)

Kerajaan

Today's Headlines

"Health D-G warns of tsunami-like third wave of Covid-19 if Malaysians don't play their part now"
Malay Mail

"People jogging, taking babies for strolls despite Movement Control Order: Wong Chen"
The Sun Daily

"IGP: Interstate travel ban stays, with exceptions - report"
The Edge Markets

"Malaysians scramble to balik kampung ahead of RMO"
New Straits Times

Recommendations

1 ## Control

The government must consider a communication committee to do the following:
1) coordinate communication across government ministries and agencies;
2) provide daily briefings to the public; and
3) disseminate key information through social media

Delegate **2**

Responsibilities must be delegated clearly between government ministries and agencies to avoid overlaps

3 ## Supervise

The government must ensure adequate supervision for the implementation of the Order

Involve **4**

Although the Order is overseen by the National Security Council, its implementation must include the Ministries of Health, Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs, and Transportation

5 ## Remind

Reinforce the fact that the Order is essentially a strict enforcement of social distancing; authorities must emphasise that the Order will not work without public cooperation

Mitigate **6**

Mitigate the urge that the public have to continue earning a living despite the Order by rolling out the COVID-19 stimulus package immediately and by reiterating that employers should continue to pay salaries throughout the period

7 ## Reinforce

Reinforce practices of goodwill and collaboration across the political divide to reassure the people that they are the priority - that it is country first, politics last

Test **8**

Aggressively increase the number of individuals tested

Crisis Proofing Malaysia

Malaysia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has lessons for both the Government and the rakyat to consider. What are some improvements that can be made to ensure we are better prepared for future crises?

BY PUTERI NOR ARIANE YASMIN

Malaysia is now at the half-way point of its Movement Control Order (MCO). Analyses abound on its Dos and Don'ts, implementation, and similarities and dissimilarities with other "lockdowns" around the world. Despite the health, economic and political crises that Malaysia is in, this author is hopeful that the nation will overcome the challenge of COVID-19 and that we will be stronger and perhaps even more united as a result.

The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated that security encompasses every single cog of government machinery. Thus far, Malaysia has proven that it does have the technical expertise and capacity needed to respond to COVID-19. While we are technically competent, however, it is unclear if we are able to meet demands at the national level in terms of resources.

The first step to crisis proofing Malaysia in the future entails a massive boost and reinvestment in all fields that are required during an emergency — from healthcare, security and law enforcement to technological infrastructure. For example, the current pandemic highlights the urgency of protecting our healthcare system from over-stretching and eventually collapsing in future crises. The pandemic also raises the issue of whether the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) field hospitals are suited for an infectious disease outbreak like COVID-19.

Second, food security is essential to pacifying the economic woes of the *rakyat*. The fear of not earning an income superseding the fear of being infected will diminish if people are not hungry, particularly those who have to earn daily in order to eat daily. The *Prihatin* stimulus package announced on 27 March provides much-needed temporary relief for survival throughout the MCO. Financial security aside, however, measures must also be put in place (and communicated) to ensure a continuous supply of food. Despite assurances, panic buying is an almost natural reflex for those who can afford it in times of crisis, with repercussions for those who cannot.

> **"The fear of not earning an income superseding the fear of being infected will diminish if people are not hungry..."**

Third, it is possible to securitise, and even over-securitise, a national crisis and entirely overlook the possible implications of doing so. The Royal Malaysia Police's (RMP) directive to obtain an approval for interstate travel led to large gatherings at police stations on the eve of the MCO, when large gatherings are an essential MCO Don't. There have also been conflicting instructions between the National Security Council (NSC) and Ministry of Health (MOH) on the usage of masks, which has resulted in supermarkets prohibiting those who do not wear them from entering. The NSC alone cannot manage and mitigate a crisis, particularly if the issue lies outside of its purview. Relevant ministries, agencies and experts must also be consulted. In Malaysia's response to COVID-19, the MOH should continue to lead to prevent the securitisation of the pandemic.

Fourth, it is in our national interest to regularise the undocumented refugees, asylum seekers and migrants with a national database that consists of biometric data. Even if not a threat, they could pose a security concern for any country.

The Government, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), NGOs and refugee community organisations must stop working in silos and cooperate fully on this front. The pandemic highlights the health-security implications of continuing the current policy of not having a policy on such undocumented groups, as authorities face difficulties in contact tracing and surveillance, both of which are essential to preventing the spread of COVID-19.

Fifth, improvements must be made on the Government's ability to communicate effectively in a crisis. This was also a key lesson in Malaysia's management of the disappearance of flight MH370. A communications committee must be able to control the narrative of the crisis as well as the solution (in this case, the MCO). This entails better communication and coordination amongst the different ministries and agencies, and better streamlining of information to the media, which are imperative to keep the *rakyat* correctly informed and to prevent fake news and fear mongering.

On the economic front, attention must be given to work in essential services as well as the capacity of local industries to provide.

There is a newfound appreciation for work that was previously known as "low-skilled" or "low-wage" – from delivery workers, grocery and food workers, cleaners and garbage collectors, to public transport and e-hailing drivers. According to MCO rules, such work is considered essential and have continued while the majority of us work from home. Moving forward, low-skilled or low-wage work should be publicised as "essential work" and be compensated accordingly in order to encourage more employment in the sector (particularly amongst locals). While healthcare workers

and law enforcement officials are imperative in containing COVID-19, those in "essential work" are vital in running our country on a daily basis.

Second, local industries should be encouraged to produce more essential items, such as health and food supplies, to avoid issues of interdependence or over-reliance on other economies. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the entire world with countries running low on medical supplies and prioritising their own efforts. In Malaysia, messages of hospitals needing masks, gloves, sanitisers, disinfectants, face shields and shoe covers – to name a few examples – went viral on social media with netizens lending a hand. If China was still in the middle of containing COVID-19, perhaps Malaysia would be unable to receive 100,000 test kits, 100,000 N95 face masks, 500,000 surgical masks, 50,000 Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs) and 200 ventilators on 28 March. We need to go further in producing more essential items domestically to ensure adequate supplies in the event that other economies can no longer deliver.

As for the *rakyat*, lessons abound for us too.

The hiccups that Malaysia faced in the early days of the MCO were our responsibility as much as the Government's. A pandemic like COVID-19 has shown that a national crisis affects every single person in the country, from the Yang Di-Pertuan Agong right down to the undocumented. In a national crisis, we are only as strong as our weakest link. In the case of this pandemic, we are only as healthy as our neighbours.

The decision to include the MAF in assisting the implementation of MCO was a result of our non-compliance. Crisis communications issues aside, we generally lacked a sense of civic duty at the beginning. The "partial lockdown" was seen as

an invasion of our freedom and privacy, instead of our collective responsibility to temporarily compromise on the norms of everyday life. This was evident across the board in both the urban and rural areas, with news headlines shedding light on some choosing to eat in public, to exercise, to *balik kampung*, to pray as a congregation and to even refuse to cooperate with (or flat-out lie to) medical staff.

The non-compliance to the MCO is an example of the *rakyat* not holding ourselves accountable in a national crisis. This attitude cannot repeat itself in the future. We must realise, and we must also accept, that not everything is the Government's responsibility. The Government has only so much control and capacity. The *rakyat* have their own responsibilities – to themselves, their communities and to the Government to allow the latter to do its job.

In spite of everything, non-profit social media campaigns have been set up to support our frontliners and the vulnerable, from the B40 to the homeless to the undocumented. For example, #kitajagakita or kitajaga.us is a verified listing of organisations and community groups that are working to assist those who are affected by the MCO. It is a platform for those who are seeking and offering help, in cash and in kind. This initiative demonstrates that there are opportunities to contribute from the comfort of one's own home. Every Malaysian is enlisted in a national crisis, whether one is at the forefront or at home. This responsibility should never be taken lightly.

Puteri Nor Ariane Yasmin is Analyst in Foreign Policy and Security Studies (FPSS), ISIS Malaysia

The Economics of a Coronavirus Pandemic

The outbreak of COVID-19 in addition to movement control measures will have a devastating impact on the Malaysian economy. A large, decisive, two-stage economic policy response can help to safeguard Malaysian livelihoods.

BY CALVIN CHENG

The new SARS-CoV-2 virus, which causes the disease COVID-19, first arrived on Malaysian shores on 25 January 2020. A month later in February, case numbers inched up to 22 positive cases. By mid-March, case numbers had ballooned 20-fold to 428 cases. In response, Malaysian authorities issued a two-week Movement Control Order (MCO) on 18 March 2020. Businesses and services deemed to be non-essential were shut down. Interstate travel was curtailed. Public sporting, religious events and gatherings were cancelled. At the time of writing on 30 March 2020, a total of 2,626 positive cases have been identified. Of those, 479 have recovered, while 37 have passed away.

By now, it is clear that this pandemic will have detrimental effects on both the Malaysian economy and the economic welfare of the *rakyat*.

Even long before the movement control measures in Malaysia, the outbreak of the new coronavirus in China had created wide-ranging supply and demand shocks that have reverberated across the globe. In Malaysia, the effects of these shocks may be dire. The Malaysian economy is amongst the most highly exposed economies in the region to both Chinese demand and supply. China is Malaysia's number one trading partner, a large source of foreign investments, and top tourist source outside of ASEAN.

Besides, MCO measures will have devastating economic costs too. On a macro level, the closure of businesses and services, along with travel and movement restrictions will have a large impact on the Malaysian economy. By many estimates, Malaysia is projected to record its lowest GDP growth rate since the Global Financial Crisis in 2009. However, its effects on individual livelihoods and businesses may be even more pernicious. Vulnerable households affected by the temporary closures will be at high risk of facing immediate cash flow constraints as their earnings dwindle.

Critically, this liquidity squeeze will be disproportionately felt by small-and-medium enterprises (SMEs), vulnerable groups such as lower-income individuals, as well as part-time and unemployed workers. This can have knock-on effects on the entire economy, leaving businesses insolvent, individuals bankrupt and the financial system saddled with non-performing loans.

As such, Malaysia's economic policy response to the coronavirus pandemic should comprise two separate stages. Stage one measures should be implemented immediately during the MCO to safeguard the income and liquidity of affected businesses and individuals. Stage two measures should comprise a hefty fiscal stimulus component and be implemented as soon as the outbreak shows signs of subsiding and movement controls are lifted.

Stage one measures should primarily involve supporting the welfare of the *rakyat* through income and liquidity support. As much as possible, the goal of stage one measures should be to allow affected

workers and businesses to remain solvent until after the pandemic subsides.

For businesses, the primary aim of stage one measures should be to reduce the number of business deaths from the outbreak. On this, affected businesses will need concessionary working capital loans to help them remain solvent during periods of reduced demand. Distressed larger firms may require access to emergency credit lines. At the same time, making a portion of these loans conditional on some employee retention target – along with generous wage assistance policies for firms – will help to preserve employer-worker relationships during the MCO.

For individuals, stage one measures should primarily aim to cushion the impact of the outbreak on the livelihoods of the *rakyat*, focusing particularly on vulnerable groups most susceptible to income shocks, such as the lower-income, the unemployed and part-time/gig economy workers.

On this, temporarily increasing benefit size and extending the benefit duration of the Employment Insurance System (EIS) would enable unemployed workers to weather adverse labour market conditions, giving them more headroom to seek employment once conditions begin to normalise. Similarly, during this emergency extension, funding for the EIS should also be temporarily shifted to the federal government instead of being funded by payroll contributions. Lastly, broadening existing coverage of the EIS – by relaxing eligibility requirements – would also be hugely beneficial in protecting the welfare of workers.

Outside of the labour force, direct cash flow support via Bantuan Sara Hidup (BSH) should be increased to reach low-income households who may not be formally employed or are unable to work. Here

a one-off increase in the BSH transfer amount for the poorest households would enable lower-income communities to purchase much-needed necessities during the MCO.

Subsequently, after the infection curve has peaked and movement controls have been lifted, stage two measures need to kick in immediately. Economic policy should now shift gears from focusing on "life support" in stage one to stimulating the economy in stage two. At this stage, past experience suggests that having both shorter-term policies to lift demand, in tandem with longer-term policies to boost productivity and human capital accumulation, will yield the greatest results.

For the shorter-term, a simple one-time cash injection to every Malaysian, structured as an immediate lump-sum tax rebate, would put money in the hands of the *rakyat* almost immediately, rapidly kickstarting aggregate demand. Recent research has suggested that such lump-sum cash injections work much quicker in getting money into the real economy compared to other fiscal policy tools like corporate tax cuts.

"By many estimates, Malaysia is projected to record its lowest GDP growth rate since the Global Financial Crisis in 2009."

For the longer-term, periods of crises present good opportunities to invest in overall productivity as well as deepening social safety nets. Increasing infrastructure spending, especially in lagging regions, can have long-term effects on productivity and economic growth. Similarly, continuing to deepen social safety nets and strengthen automatic stabilisers, like the EIS, will incentivise human capital accumulation and ensure the Malaysian economy and workers are better prepared for future crises.

Certainly, none of this will be easy. For starters, it will be costly. Government budget deficit targets will need to be overshot. Difficult decisions will need to be made later on taxation and expenditures – though with progressive taxation reforms these costs can be borne primarily by the wealthy. Additionally, intense amounts of political determination will be required – especially because certain laws may need to be amended, especially ones concerning unemployment insurance and government borrowing.

Yet the economic, social and political cost of inaction – or even insufficient action – is something far greater and far more frightening. This is no time to pull punches. After all, extraordinary times require extraordinary measures, and while the outbreak may eventually be conquered through vigorous public health efforts, without a sufficiently large and immediate fiscal response, the economic scars it leaves behind will be felt for decades to come.

Compliance: Too Difficult of a Pill to Swallow?

In past health security crises, the military and police have played a role to mitigate and solve issues. COVID-19 is unprecedented in that it restricts movement across the nation. With shifting goalposts and ambiguous definitions for full compliance, would society be able to achieve the 100 percent wanted? And is full compliance the only component to flatten the curve?

BY IZZAH KHAIRINA IBRAHIM AND FARLINA SAID

Panic – that was part of the mayhem that awaited enforcement officers ensuring civil protection measures are enforced. Malaysia's Movement Control Order (MCO) was announced at 10pm on 16 March 2020 with full enforcement commencing at the stroke of midnight on 18 March. With less than 48 hours of notice, combined with a lack of clarity, conflicting information sources and ambiguous limitations of the order, it sparked a flurry of intrastate and interstate movement.

The growing demand for manpower to ensure compliance saw the mobilisation of the Malaysian Armed Forces on 22 March. They joined state security councils, district management centres and RELA personnel, who were all given similar jurisdiction as their police counterparts.

Conversations on the implementation and timeliness of the MCO aside, the order placed a hefty task on the enforcement forces of Malaysia. The order to restrict movement was pursuant to the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases (PCID) Act 1988 and Police Act (PA) 1967, which includes measures intended to control the spread of the disease – including addressing the movement of vehicles and people. Shortly after, the Attorney General's Chambers released a federal gazette providing enforcement specifics for the MCO, specifying a penalty up to RM 1,000 and/or up to six months in prison for those disobeying.

There is a correlation between the severity, utility and role of armed forces in the case of health security. During the 1999 Nipah virus outbreak, the army and the police were utilised. At its peak, Malaysia had 265 Nipah virus cases with 105 deaths. However, as the source of the outbreak was livestock and the legislation used was the Animal Ordinance 1953, the armed forces were intended to control the movement of pigs and cull the animals infected. The police sealed areas with the assistance of the people's volunteer corps (RELA) while the army was dispensed to eliminate infected animals.

In other experiences, Malaysia's borders were briefly closed to countries displaying high infection rates to navigate the SARS outbreak. Malaysia had reported only 5 cases with 2 fatalities then. The 2009-2010 H1N1 pandemic painted a different experience. Malaysia had 14,912 cases with 88 deaths in a period of about 14 months. Malaysia had declared a health emergency four months after the first confirmed case landed on Malaysian soil. However, as the mortality rate of H1N1 did not breach the threshold stipulated by the Ministry of Health, no national curfew was applied. Rather, the Ministry warned of taking court action against those who defy self-quarantine orders or were caught without a mask on the streets. Additionally, schools with infected students were closed. As such, neither of the past health crises necessitated a large role for the armed forces.

In comparison, on 31 March, Malaysia has 2,766 COVID-19 cases with 43 fatalities. Yet, concerns for a lack of action sparked fear in authorities given that Italy reported growth from approximately 100 cases to more than 10,000 cases in over two weeks. This is primarily due to how one individual infected with the coronavirus is said to be capable of transmitting it to three people, thus measures to break the chain of transmission becomes necessary – particularly as hosts of the virus can be asymptomatic or would only develop symptoms later. In comparison, Malaysia's approach to H1N1 relied on the display of influenza-like illnesses.

Early delivery of the MCO restricted overseas travels by Malaysians, a complete ban of large gatherings including religious activities, as well as the closure of all government and private premises except for those involved in providing essential services. There are several exceptions to movement, among them being purchasing food, hosting small funerals or wedding solemnisations, or if you are a part of the food supply chain. A method of measuring the success of the MCOs is through the number of cars available at roadblocks. With commuting being indispensable

to some aspects of the Malaysian life, authorities are challenged to drive this figure down.

By 30 March, several areas were elevated to the Extended Movement Control Order (EMCO) status due to the display of a higher degree of cases and stricter standard operating procedures (SOPs) were implemented for other areas. The EMCO is a complete restriction of movement with zero ability to leave homes or conduct business activities, while basic foodstuffs will be supplied by the Social Welfare Department.

In order to uphold national security and ensure civil order, it is imperative for key decision-makers and frontliners to effectively enforce compliance to the MCO. The scale of this crisis goes beyond immediate movement control, and will require coordination across all relevant government bodies. While respective ministries have diligently provided regular updates, packaged into neat numbers and appealing percentages to indicate civil order and national security are being kept, the question is how are we certain that measures are being captured accurately?

"For example, it was reported that by 28 March more than 1,000 people have been arrested since the start of the MCO, a mere 10 days earlier. This is seemingly at odds with information reported into the sixth day of the MCO, where official reports stated that the MCO has achieved a 95 percent compliance rate."

This emphasises how compliance is not an easily measured figure, especially in a continuously changing and unpredictable crisis situation. Complicating matters is that different states have different

different procedures for compliance, which can affect what qualifies for successful deliverables of the MCO. For instance, Terengganu has a rotation for cars on the road based on the number plates, while Melaka had limited trading hours even before the MCO.

This highlights the importance of not just the transparency, but the clarity, of such information. While raw data and infographics painting productive efforts have circulated throughout the commencement of the MCO, the context and the means to interpret the information remain uncertain. Little in-depth analysis has been made with these figures, notably the means to numerically determine areas of progress and areas requiring improvement.

The subsequent dilemma that follows is the way to interpret the increased reports of law enforcement taking disciplinary measures. Is the greater number of those punished for disobedience a marker of effectiveness? Or is this an indication of the broader difficulty found in the enforcement methods of the MCO? These considerations can be further complicated given the ongoing changes to the punishments for given offences over time.

The intentions to indicate fruitful progress and assurance against confusion without the supporting information would be a disservice to both the country and those working towards containing the virus. Producing such figures are important to be transparent in their efforts to contain the spread of the virus, but Malaysia cannot afford false positives nor a false sense of security in our compliance.

A nationwide restriction of movement has not occurred to those born in this generation. In mitigating H1N1, the Nipah virus and SARS, restrictions were highly specific and did not encompass daily routines.

Information dissemination and public education has proven themselves invaluable, particularly in the case of handling the Nipah virus and H1N1. It should be the go-to approach for the government, relevant institutions and anybody seeking to better prepare themselves against this pandemic or any future pandemics. These are especially important for enforcement bodies as compliance is better achieved when authority figures can effectively control these gaps of information in a timely manner and, hence, become the guiding hand for its citizens.

While the current security arrangement is in line with the law, it does not negate the significant power distances and trust issues between the armed forces and the general public. This has been evident in the number of misdemeanors that were related to resistance to authority. As Malaysia braces for the peak of transmissions, it would not be surprising if the present role of the armed forces shifts. However, such changes need to be justified and clearly articulated. Escalation of action should not be made to chase an arbitrary goal. The goal is to flatten the curve and defeat COVID-19, not perpetually tighten restrictions.

There is a difference between hysteria and heightened awareness, and the journey to the latter can be difficult to canvass for the entirety of Malaysia. Regardless, striving for transparency, communication and cooperation can go a long way for society and its security forces to mitigate the virus.

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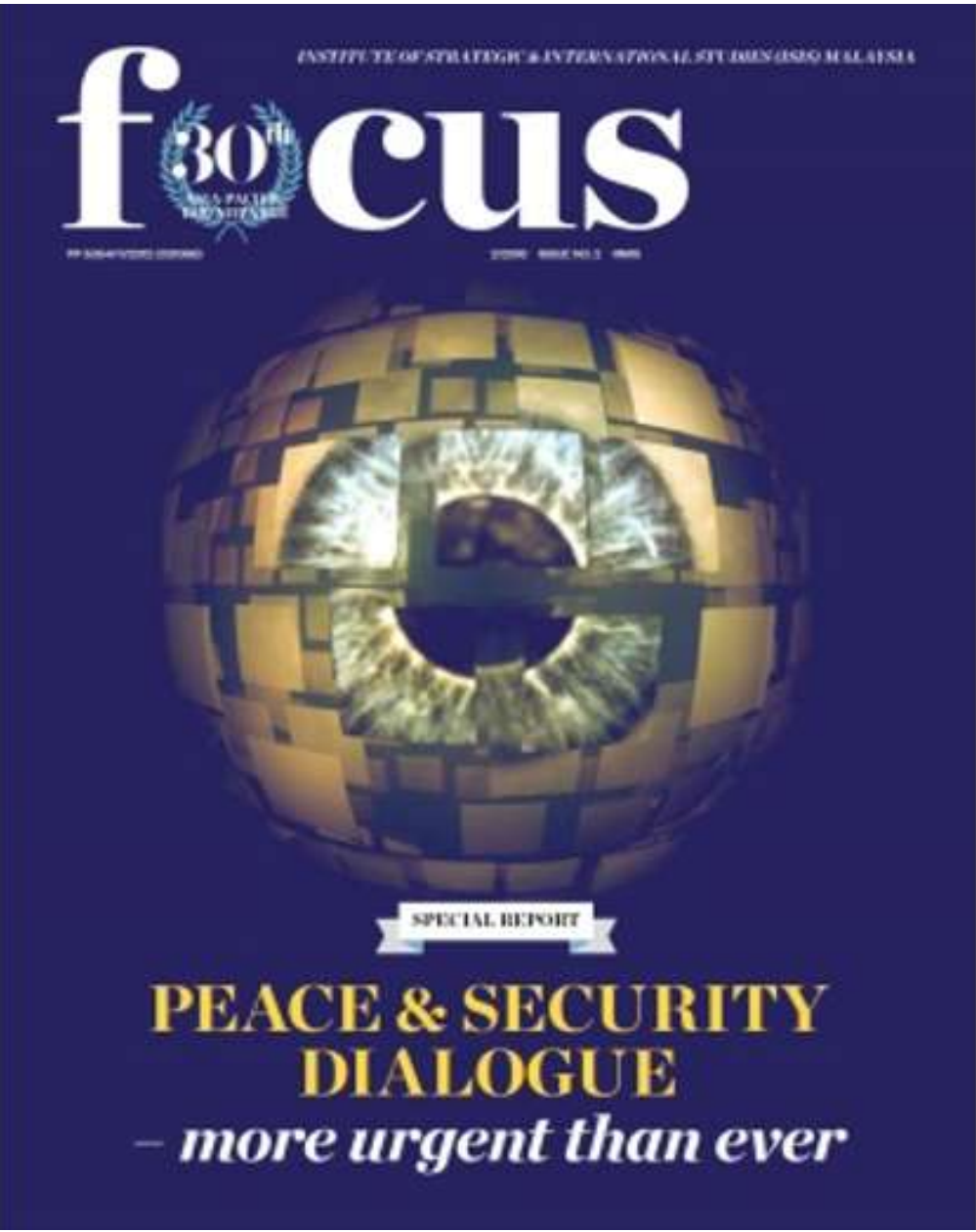
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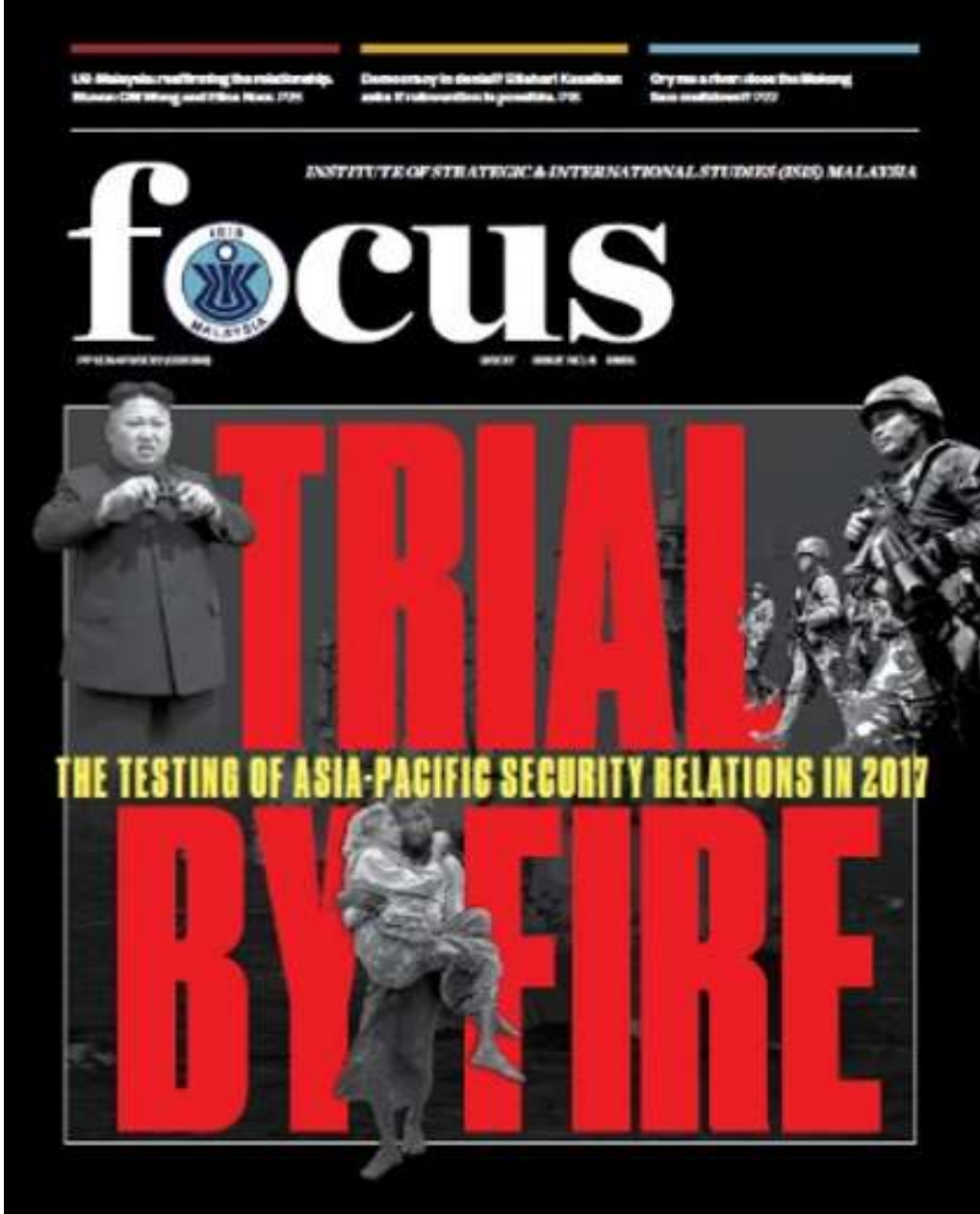(Special Report)
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