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## **Dealing with COVID-19 Pandemic in Malaysia: Lessons from *Negeri Jiran***

Zarina Zainuddin

*Analyst, Foreign Policy and Security Studies (FPSS),  
Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia*

Muhammad Sinatra

*Analyst, Foreign Policy and Security Studies (FPSS),  
Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia*

The story of Malaysia's fight against the COVID-19 pandemic thus far is not only an interesting one. It should also be a point of reference to other countries in Southeast Asia which are undergoing this gravest crisis in our time. Once hailed as Southeast Asia's pandemic epicentre, Malaysia has managed to arrest the spread of the virus without experiencing any societal backlash that threatens public order and stability, at least for now.

As of 2 May, Malaysia has recorded 6,176 confirmed COVID-19 cases, with 4,326 recoveries (70 percent) and 102 deaths (1.67 percent).<sup>1</sup>The slowing down of the daily numbers of infection in recent weeks has dropped Malaysia's ranking in total confirmed cases among Southeast Asian countries, from the first slot to the fourth. Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines have since overtaken Malaysia in this list.

Indeed, much of its success could be attributed to the government's swift, decisive, and comprehensive policies as well as strong participation of the public, private sector and the non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This article aims to introduce readers to some dynamics of Malaysia's response to the health crisis, in the hope that its lessons, both good and bad, can be drawn.

### *The Twin Approaches: the MCO and Testing*

Compared to its regional peers, Malaysia is the first country to impose a nationwide, quasi-lockdown measure entitled the Movement Control Order (MCO)<sup>2</sup>, which commenced on 18 March 2020. The MCO entails a total ban on all mass gatherings including religious activities; the closure of all educational institutions; travel restrictions for Malaysians and foreigners (interstate travel is not allowed while foreigners cannot enter the country); and the closure of public and private enterprises (except those that deal in essential services). The MCO is notable for being a comprehensive measure, affecting all individuals and interests tied to the country.

The implementation of the MCO underlines the swift and decisive nature of the Government's response. Its announcement was made on 16 March 2020, around a month and a half after the detection of Malaysia's first case and as the country's total confirmed cases passed the 500 mark. The fact that it was announced slightly more than two weeks after Malaysia's recent political crisis further underscores the responsiveness of the country's political structure to undertake bold measures, even when the public's confusion over its political turbulence had yet to abate.

The Government complemented the MCO with increased contact tracing and testing. The capacity to conduct testing has been progressively increased from 3,500 daily tests (at the beginning of the outbreak) to 11,500<sup>3</sup> by early April and 16,500 by late April. The Ministry of Health (MoH) is now aiming to perform 22,000 tests daily in early May.<sup>4</sup>

Some areas that see an elevated rate of infection have also been put under Enhanced MCO (EMCO). The measure is essentially a stricter form of the MCO, with the areas being put under total lockdown and residents are not allowed to leave their homes, among other measures<sup>5</sup>. Some of these areas include Simpang Renggam (Johor), Sungai Lui (Selangor), Menara City One, Selangor Mansion and Malayan Mansion (Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur).

The twin approaches undertaken by the Government – imposing the MCO and increasing testing aggressively – have arguably delivered some positive results. The MoH declared in early April that signs of a flattening curve were already visible as Malaysia's actual confirmed cases fell behind a

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<sup>1</sup> 2020. "Covid-19: 105 new cases, death toll remains at 103." *The Star*. 2 May. Accessed April 3, 2020.

<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/05/02/covid-19-105-new-cases-death-toll-remains-at-103>.

<sup>2</sup> The lockdown in the Philippines, which was announced earlier, only affects certain areas.

<sup>3</sup> Mohd, Hariz. 2020. "Health DG explains why reported Covid-19 tests appear below capacity." *MalaysiaKini*. 1 April. Accessed April 23, 2020. <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/518202>.

<sup>4</sup> Zainul, Emir. 2020. "Malaysia to reach 22,000 Covid-19 tests per day by next week." *The Edge Markets*. 27 April. Accessed April 28, 2020. <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/malaysia-reach-22000-covid19-tests-day-next-week>.

<sup>5</sup> Sham, Nursyazwani Saiful. 2020. "COVID-19: PKPD dikuat kuasa di dua kawasan di Simpang Renggam." *Astro Awani*. 26 March. Accessed May 3, 2020. <http://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/covid-19-pkpd-dikuat-kuasa-di-dua-kawasan-di-simpang-renggam-235454>.

forecast projected by the Malaysian Institute of Economic Research (MIER).<sup>6</sup> This is further compounded by the further decrease in new confirmed cases on a daily basis, which starting from 15 April fell to double-digit figures.<sup>7</sup> Such a drop is not permanent, however, as cases rose back to triple-digit figures again on 2 May<sup>8</sup>.

The case of Malaysia's strategy shows that movement restriction measures and testing capacity must go hand-in-hand. A partial or half-hearted implementation of these twin approaches might not produce results as positive as they are today. Furthermore, the Malaysian Government has also demonstrated its temerity to extend the MCO three times thus far, placing the whole nation under this restrictive measure for seven weeks now.

A prolonged MCO, however, is undesirable. Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin informed that Malaysia is losing as much as RM2.4 billion (Rp8.5 trillion) daily during the MCO due to the large-scale suspension of economic activities.<sup>9</sup> Despite this and Malaysia's falling cases, the Government was reluctant to discuss plans on the relaxation or lifting of the MCO for a considerable period of time.

This came to change on the Labour Day when Prime Minister Muhyiddin unexpectedly announced the relaxation of the MCO by allowing most economic activities to resume on 4 May under the newly termed CMCO ("C" for conditional). However, all activities are subjected to a strict standard of procedure (SOP) and activities that involve public gathering such as sports, conferences, cinema, weddings, and businesses that require close proximity are still banned. Furthermore, religious activities such as Friday prayer, Sunday church and others are also not allowed.<sup>10</sup>

The MCO is basically still in effect, conditional with the same punitive actions for those who disobey. Any businesses found guilty of breaking the SOP will have their permits revoked immediately. Many of the loosening of activities are limited to within the 10-kilometre radius from home, although now one can travel beyond that limit for essential activities. All borders are still closed, and interstate travel requires permission from the police. The resumption of economic activities has dual purposes – generating income for self-employed as well as contract workers (B40) and lightening government burden in income subsidising.

The timing of the announcement caught many by surprise as it came in days after the fourth phase of the MCO commenced. Interestingly, reactions by most Malaysian are muted – rather than rejoicing, many remain cautious, perhaps not completely convinced that the threat of the pandemic is lessening. Days after the announcement, a petition to maintain the MCO, citing concerns over untimely relaxation, has garnered over 420,000 signatures.<sup>11</sup>

The cautious reactions from the public is a good thing. The CMCO phase is most critical, as it requires greater participation and cooperation of society when the restriction is lessened. The public have to step up and be disciplined in adhering to the new norms practises such as maintaining physical

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<sup>6</sup> Kaos Jr, Joseph. 2020. "Health Ministry figures show Covid-19 curve is flattening, says Health DG." *The Star*. 1 April. Accessed April 20, 2020. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/04/01/health-ministry-figures-show-covid-19-curve-is-flattening-says-health-dg>.

<sup>7</sup> Please see [www.outbreak.my](http://www.outbreak.my)

<sup>8</sup> Salim, Syafiqah. 2020. "Covid-19: Malaysia's new daily cases rise above 100 again, at 105 vs 116 recoveries." *The Edge Markets*. 2 May. Accessed May 3, 2020. <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/covid19-malysias-new-daily-cases-rise-above-100-again-105-vs-116-recoveries>.

<sup>9</sup> Timbuong, Jo. 2020. "Our economy loses RM2.4bil every day MCO is active, says PM." *The Star*. 25 April. Accessed April 26, 2020. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/04/25/our-economy-loses-rm24bil-every-day-mco-is-active-says-pm>.

<sup>10</sup> 2020. "What you need to know about the conditional movement control order." MalayMail. 1 May. Accessed May 2, 2020. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/05/01/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-conditional-movement-control-order/1862092>.

<sup>11</sup> Please see [www.change.org/p/rakyat-malaysia-teruskan-pkp-batalkan-pkp-bersyarat?signed=true](http://www.change.org/p/rakyat-malaysia-teruskan-pkp-batalkan-pkp-bersyarat?signed=true)

distancing, wearing masks and ensuring good hygiene. The Government's usage of the term "conditional" resonates with the public as it emphasises the notion that the fight is still on and things are not back to normal as yet. Ultimately, the success or failure of the CMCO will depend largely on the empowered society playing its part responsibly.

Like other countries, Malaysia is also tied to the health vs economy debate of the pandemic. Its boldness to introduce and extend the MCO seems to show that the Government prioritises public health concerns over economic ones as well as the country's capability to withstand economic pressures thus far into the pandemic period. More research must be conducted, nonetheless, whether its decision to implement the CMCO is due to mounting economic pressures that cannot be ignored anymore.

Even as things improve with time, Malaysia will be further challenged as it embarks on CMCO. As easing requires a stepwise approach, the Government must observe whether the people and its economy could adapt to the new normal, even as it plans for further relaxation while continuing to suppress the disease.

### *Effective Communication and Coordination*

Communication is the probably the most important tool in the fight against COVID-19. The MCO requires compliance as well as responsible behaviour of citizens (physical distancing, use of face mask, frequent hand washing, etiquette of self-quarantine) in order to break the virus chain. For the people to adhere to these standards, a steady and clear communication from the top must be present.

In Malaysia, there have been numerous misinformation and conflicting messages that threaten the effectiveness of the MCO. As of 16 April, the police had opened 220 investigation papers on misinformation cases and 24 individuals had been charged<sup>12</sup>. Conflicting messages occurred especially in the early days of the MCO, one of which involved the disagreement between Minister of Health Dr Adham Baba and Director General of Health Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah over the benefit of warm water in eliminating the virus from one's body.

Perhaps the most glaring example of miscommunication was the confusion over the terms and conditions on the moratorium on hire-purchase loan, which was conceived to lessen the financial burden of Malaysians during the MCO.<sup>13</sup> The conflicting messages on this particular case may be due to an oversight in calculating the economic measures, as the authorities placed extraordinary focus on fine tuning the measures to contain the outbreak in the beginning.

The Government has made attempts at being on top of these disruptions by communicating more clearly and frequently. Messages are delivered by the proper authority – for example important announcements including measures and policies by the Prime Minister, while medical updates by Director General of Health Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah. In Malaysia, the Prime Minister's plea to "Stay at Home" has become the catchword and gave a sense of ownership to the people to play their part. The effectiveness of the Government's messaging is evident in the degree of compliance on the part of Malaysian public to the MCO restrictions, which reached 97 percent<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Bunyan, John. 2020. "Minister: 220 investigation papers opened on Covid-19 fake news to date." *MalayMail*. 16 April. Accessed April 24, 2020. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/04/16/minister-220-investigation-papers-opened-on-covid-19-fake-news-to-date/1857297>.

<sup>13</sup> En, Chow Zhi. 2020. "Banks to explain six-month loan moratorium to hire purchase customers." *The Star*. 30 April. Accessed May 2, 2020. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/04/30/banks-to-explain-six-month-loan-moratorium-to-hire-purchase-customers>.

<sup>14</sup> 2020. "Compliance at 97% as 614 held for defying MCO." *The Star*. 29 March. Accessed April 18, 2020. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/03/29/compliance-at-97-as-614-held-for-defying-mco>.

Effective communication ensures greater cooperation and coordination across the various ministries, government agencies, private sectors, civil societies and the public. The MCO, while an important measure to break the chain and slow the spread, will not on its own eliminate the virus. Imposing lockdowns is the easy part. The hard part is the concerted effort of identifying, isolating, treating and contact tracing of the infected, in which everyone and every institution have a role to play.

It was not always a smooth sailing in the early days of the MCO. A number of Malaysians were warned to disperse during the first weeks of the MCO for partaking in leisure activities. Malaysians and non-Malaysians alike were also observed to have disregarded the MCO by taking strolls and jogging. Furthermore, a mechanic had to be arrested for impeding a police officer from executing his duties<sup>15</sup> and the police were called in to compel an elderly man linked to the Sri Petaling *tabligh* gathering to undergo a screening and quarantine process.<sup>16</sup> These are just some illustrations of the violations that took place during the MCO.

Such incidences could be partly attributed to the initial lack of effective communication, coordination and cooperation between all parties involved. It has happened in Malaysia and may continue to happen.

Malaysia's federalism also has an effect in coordinating the national strategy. The presence of the federal government has always been strong in Malaysia, making it easier for the government to impose nationwide measures, though this is not always the case elsewhere. In countries where states have prominent roles such as the United States or archipelagic nations such as Indonesia, the central government may have to delegate or share responsibility.

Although local governments have greater familiarity with its constituency and are able to provide a targeted solution, there is a danger that the differences in policies between central and local governments could worsen the situation. For example, citizens fleeing an impending lockdown from an area could unintentionally spread the virus elsewhere. Concerns were raised on the matter in Indonesia when a number of residents left Jakarta to return to their hometowns.

Malaysia witnessed a similar phenomenon in the two days that preceded the first day of the MCO, with a large number of individuals flocking bus stations and police stations to obtain a permit to embark on interstate travels.<sup>17</sup> In Malaysia's case, the phenomenon can be attributed to the lack of comprehension of the lockdown measures as well as the holiday mood from the school break that happened during the same period.

The state of Selangor, for example, was criticised for allowing auto workshops, spare part outlets as well as beer breweries to operate during the MCO.<sup>18</sup> Religious matters, which are held by states with greater authority, have also added to the mix, as Kedah allows limited congregational prayers to resume.<sup>19</sup> Kedah, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Sabah, Pahang, Perak, Kelantan, Penang and Sarawak

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<sup>15</sup> 2020. "Mechanic first person charged over enforcement of MCO." *The Star*. 23 March. Accessed April 17, 2020. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/03/23/mechanic-first-person-charged-over-enforcement-of-mco>.

<sup>16</sup> Camoens, Austin. 2020. "Elderly man refuses Covid-19 screening, cops called in to compel him." *The Star*. 20 March . Accessed April 19, 2020. 22.

<sup>17</sup> 2020. "First stop at police station." *The Star*. 18 March . Accessed April 25, 2020. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/03/18/first-stop-at-police-station>.

<sup>18</sup> Anis, Mazwin Nik. 2020. "States cannot act on own authority during MCO'." *The Star*. 7 April. Accessed April 23, 2020. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/04/07/states-cannot-act-on-own-authority-during-mco>.

<sup>19</sup> Awang, Abd Hadi Che. 2020. "Kedah benarkan solat jemaah di masjid namun terhad kepada 3 orang." *Astro Awani*. 17 April. Accessed April 24, 2020. <http://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/kedah-benarkan-solat-jemaah-di-masjid-namun-terhad-kepada-3-orang-238790>.

have also announced that the CMCO will not be implemented there, as they wait for more studies assessing the implications of the CMCO.

Although in general the adherence of state governments to restrictive standards is very high, outlier cases such as these show that some things could get lost in translation when the power flows from the centre to the periphery. The hesitation of several states to follow Putrajaya's move to implement CMCO also spurs more questions and debates as to the nature of relationship between the federal and state governments.

### Participation of the Public, the Private Sector and the CSOs

The Government alone will not be able to deal with the pandemic – Putrajaya has enlisted the help of the private sector and civil society to share its burden. For instance, the MoH in early March launched a collaborative sampling service that allows for Malaysians to be tested for COVID-19 at home by private hospitals health practitioners<sup>20</sup>.

Another initiative by private medical institutions is the drive-thru and walking in screening and testing of COVID-19, often offered at discounted fees<sup>21</sup>. In fact, Malaysia managed to increase the number of labs to 43 by collaborating with labs operated by private medical institutions and universities<sup>22</sup>. The increased capacities facilitated the achievement of conducting 16,500 tests daily, as mentioned before. By working together with private hospitals, universities as well as utilising military hospitals<sup>23</sup> and converting facilities of government institutions into make-shift hospitals<sup>24</sup>, Malaysia is able to reduce the burden and create additional space in public hospitals to focus on treating COVID-19 patients.

The NGOs and private sectors have done their parts in supplying food, provisions and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to front liners. Malaysian designers, including renowned Indonesian-born Datuk Jovian Mandagie, have banded together to provide PPE suits. Datuk Jovan was quoted as saying that he was motivated to do so after seeing front liners donning raincoats and garbage bags due to shortage of PPE suits<sup>25</sup>. Additionally, Proton, Malaysia's oldest national car manufacturer, has converted its Shah Alam plant to produce face shield for health workers. Prior to this, Proton had loaned 50 units of its premiere SUVs to the MoH for the latter's usage<sup>26</sup>.

A number of NGOs, retailers, eateries and volunteers had stepped up in their assistance in providing food and provisions to both front liners and vulnerable groups of the society such as the poor, the elderly, the homeless, the disable and migrant workers. Substantial sums have also been donated by

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<sup>20</sup> 2020. "Test for Covid-19 from your home." *New Straits Times*. 9 March. Accessed April 28, 2020. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/03/573213/test-covid-19-your-home>.

<sup>21</sup> Malek, Nur Haziqah A. 2020. "Private medical institutions offer drive-thru, walk-in screening." *The Malaysian Reserve*. 7 April. Accessed April 28, 2020. <https://themalaysianreserve.com/2020/04/07/private-medical-institutions-offer-drive-thru-walk-in-screening/>.

<sup>22</sup> Zainul, Emir. 2020. "Malaysia to reach 22,000 Covid-19 tests per day by next week." *The Edge Markets*. 27 April. Accessed April 28, 2020. <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/malaysia-reach-22000-covid19-tests-day-next-week>.

<sup>23</sup> 2020. "Tuanku Mizan Military Hospital ready to help treat COVID-19 patients." *Bernama.com*. 17 April. Accessed April 28, 2020. <https://www.bernama.com/en/general/news.php?id=1832748>.

<sup>24</sup> Khairulrijal, Rahmat. 2020. "Covid-19: Maeps transformed into massive makeshift hospital." *New Straits Times*. 4 April. Accessed April 28, 2020. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/04/581248/covid-19-maeps-transformed-massive-makeshift-hospital>.

<sup>25</sup> Rahim, Rahimy, and Clarissa Chung. 2020. "Fashion designers help produce PPE." *The Star*. 15 April. Accessed April 28, 2020. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/04/15/fashion-designers-help-produce-ppe>.

<sup>26</sup> 2020. "Covid-19: Proton to produce face shields for frontliners." *MalayMail*. 9 April. Accessed April 28, 2020. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/04/09/proton-to-produce-face-shields-for-frontliners/1855215>.

concerned Malaysians from all walks of life to foundations and organisations, ranging from various COVID-19 funds to the National Zoo.<sup>27</sup>

Regardless of the collective efforts there are still some shortfalls. Among them are reported oversight of essential items such as baby formula and diapers in care packages; failure to reach and assist segments of the most vulnerable groups; legality issues regarding fund raisings and collections; and inadvertent breaking of the MCO rules by visiting dignitaries. Nevertheless, COVID-19 is a national level crisis and requires participants from all of society if we are to have a chance to win the fight.

### Challenge: Malaysia's Position Towards Non-Malaysians

Malaysia's case also shows how the health crisis could propel domestic insecurities to the public space. Some of these are long-standing issues that Malaysia has grappled with for decades and the pandemic forces the country, both its government and the people, to confront them head-first. For example, its experience since the beginning of the MCO has called into question the perceived assumption of Malaysia as a modern and urban country that is open and warm towards foreign nationals.

The arrival of hundreds of Rohingya refugees in early April has triggered a robust opposition from some quarters and, more worryingly, a form of xenophobic attitude from others. The persistent reluctance to accept these refugees seems to be compounded by the worry that the refugees could expose Malaysia to a higher risk of COVID-19 infection.<sup>28</sup> Arguments based on humanitarian and religious grounds to allow their entry seem to have little tangible effects on the air of fear and restlessness that shrouds the country, with many in social media calling for their expulsion or sending death threats to those who support their entry. This is despite the fact that we are already living in the month of Ramadhan.

The concern over refugees also casts light on foreign workers who are already here, both legal and illegal. The recent surge of infection among foreign workers in Singapore has incited a similar worry in Malaysia, where some doubt that foreign worker communities in 3D jobs (dirty, dangerous, and difficult) receive enough testing from the authorities. Reportedly, only 14,187 foreign workers have been tested for COVID-19 by 25 April<sup>29</sup>, a far cry from an estimated 5.5 million in the country.<sup>30</sup> The slowing down of the daily infection rate bestows a window of opportunity to look after this matter, so as not to repeat others' missteps.

Getting the cooperation of the foreign workers could be a challenge, however. The sense of untrustworthiness held by the refugees (many of whom are employed by Malaysian companies) towards Malaysian authorities could serve as a barrier for the provision of medical service and intervention.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, their priorities during the MCO are to survive and put food on the table, as

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<sup>27</sup> Savitha, Anne Grace. 2020. "Zoo Negara receives RM70,000 from public after plea for funds amid Covid-19 shutdown." *MalayMail*. 2 April. Accessed April 25, 2020. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/life/2020/04/02/zoo-negara-receives-rm70000-from-public-after-plea-for-funds-amid-covid-19/1852785>.

<sup>28</sup> Daniel, Thomas, and Puteri Nor Ariane Yasmin. 2020. "Malaysia shouldn't use coronavirus as an excuse to reject Rohingya refugees." *South China Morning Post*. 23 April. Accessed April 25, 2020. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3081225/malaysia-shouldnt-use-coronavirus-excuse-reject-rohingya-refugees>.

<sup>29</sup> Idris, Ahmad Naqib. 2020. "Over 14,000 migrant workers tested for Covid-19, 676 confirmed positive so far." *The Edge Markets*. 25 April. Accessed April 26, 2020. <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/over-14000-migrant-workers-are-tested-covid19-virus-676-confirmed-positive-so-far>.

<sup>30</sup> Sukumaran, Tashny. 2020. "Coronavirus: for Malaysia's migrant workers, lack of food is a bigger worry than Covid-19." *South China Morning Post*. 26 April. Accessed April 27, 2020. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3081310/coronavirus-malaysias-migrant-workers-lack-food-bigger>.

<sup>31</sup> Ameera, Tengku Ilisha, and Puteri Nor Ariane Yasmin. 2020. "Health Insecurity and Its Impacts on Refugees in Malaysia." *ISIS Focus Special Edition - 2*, 17 April: 15-17.

opposed to adhering to public health imperatives.<sup>32</sup> All these and others may contribute to the foreigners' hesitation to play their role in "breaking the chain" campaign in Malaysia.

Perhaps in response to this problem, the Malaysian authorities opted for a more drastic action by rounding up undocumented migrants inhabiting three buildings under the EMCO – Selangor Mansion, Malayan Mansion and Menara City One.<sup>33</sup> Over 700 individuals, including children and ethnic Rohingya refugees, were detained, screened for COVID-19 and subsequently sent to immigration facilities. Officials explained that this measure was to prevent the foreigners from spreading the virus to other areas.<sup>34</sup> A backlash from parts of the society and NGOs followed, some citing the manner with which the foreigners were treated and the cramped as well as unhygienic nature of detention centres.<sup>35</sup> This development could further deter foreign workers from coming forward voluntarily for testing.

Of course, during a crisis it is absolutely normal for states to look after the welfare of its own citizens before the rest of the population. Malaysia has demonstrated this by addressing the needs of Malaysians who are currently abroad. For example, the Malaysian High Commission in Tokyo reportedly distributed care packages to Malaysians living or stranded in Japan.<sup>36</sup> This shows Malaysia's shift to people diplomacy at a time of crisis, deploying staff of its foreign missions to do wellness checks and assist its citizens abroad with legal matters and care packages. Such a step is consistent with the prescription by the WHO, which urged embassies to move from summit diplomacy to people diplomacy.

What about members of Malaysia's expatriate community who are currently abroad? Comprising holders of Malaysia My Second Home (MM2H), visa, employment pass and dependants' pass, these individuals have been thrust into a difficult situation since the enactment of the MCO. Per the MCO regulation, non-Malaysians are not allowed to enter the country, even if they are expats who have lived in the country for years. Unfortunately, some of these did not manage or were unable to return to Malaysia before the commencement of the MCO, leaving them stuck at whichever country they are now. As a result, families are divided and cash is running out as these expats continue to be denied entry for weeks.

While necessary, the inflexibility of the regulation towards expats could damage the reputation of Malaysia, which was voted as the 9th best destination for expats last year<sup>37</sup>. There have been calls to relax some of the restrictions to those who have called Malaysia their home<sup>38</sup>, especially as conditions continue to improve in Malaysia.

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<sup>32</sup> Sukumaran, Tashny. 2020. "Coronavirus: for Malaysia's migrant workers, lack of food is a bigger worry than Covid-19." *South China Morning Post*. 26 April. Accessed April 27, 2020. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3081310/coronavirus-malaysias-migrant-workers-lack-food-bigger>.

<sup>33</sup> Sukumaran, Tashny, and Bhavan Jaipragas. 2020. "Coronavirus: hundreds arrested as Malaysia cracks down on migrants in Covid-19 red zones." *South China Morning Post*. 1 May. Accessed May 3, 2020. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3082529/coronavirus-hundreds-arrested-malaysia-cracks-down-migrants>.

<sup>34</sup> 2020. "Malaysia rounds up migrants to contain coronavirus, UN warns of detention risks." *The Straits Times*. 2 May. Accessed May 3, 2020. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/malaysia-rounding-up-migrants-to-contain-coronavirus-spread-police-say>.

<sup>35</sup> 2020. "Malaysia detains hundreds of refugees and migrants during COVID-19 lockdown: Rights groups." *Channel News Asia*. 1 May. Accessed May 3, 2020. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/coronavirus-covid-19-migrants-detain-rights-groups-12695194>.

<sup>36</sup> Savitha, Anne Grace. 2020. "Embassy praised online after distributing care packages to Malaysians stranded in Japan amid Covid-19 pandemic." *MalayMail*. 15 April. Accessed April 29, 2020. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/life/2020/04/15/embassy-praised-online-after-distributing-care-packages-to-malaysians-stran/1856920>.

<sup>37</sup> Arumugam, Tharanya. 2020. "Expats plead to be allowed to return to Malaysia." *New Straits Times*. 19 April. Accessed April 23, 2020. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2020/04/585750/expats-plead-be-allowed-return-malaysia>.

<sup>38</sup> 2020. "Review immigration rules during MCO." *The Malaysian Insight*. 29 April. Accessed April 29, 2020. <https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/241362>.



Not everything is doom and gloom, however. The Government has given permission for stranded tourists with expired visa to remain in the country for the remainder of the MCO.<sup>39</sup> Recently, the Immigration Department has also allowed workers to renew their pass if it expires during the MCO period<sup>40</sup>, thus demonstrating Malaysia's sympathy towards foreigners in the country.

Although it can be argued that Malaysia has done an extraordinary job to ensure the welfare of Malaysians during the pandemic, it finds itself compelled to address its relationship with non-Malaysians, many of which have contributed to its economy over the years. The pandemic seems to have this effect: forcing Malaysia to confront delicate issues that have been part and parcel of its domestic affairs for a long time. Malaysia has taken some positive steps to ameliorate some of these inconveniences and might continue to do more as the situation improves.

### Conclusions

This writing is not meant to be a comparison exercise but to highlight the strength, weaknesses and challenges that Malaysia has faced during this unprecedented time. Like other countries, Malaysia has also struggled not only with the sheer amount of challenges, but also with its own mistakes. However, it is the boldness of the Government, coupled with the resilience of the health system and the participation of the people, that ultimately improve Malaysia's fighting chance against the pathogen. Future developments in the CMCO period will further inform us whether Malaysia has really adapted to the new normal and if the decision to partially open up was a correct one.

Evidently, there are some varying degrees of similarities between the events in and approaches taken by both Malaysia and Indonesia. This further suggests the imperative to rely and learn from each other, instead of looking at the practices and experiences of some far-off lands. At the end of the day, COVID-19 developments in one country would undeniably have a direct or indirect impact on the other. People might need to distance from each other, but countries in Southeast Asia must remain together.

**CSIS Indonesia, Pakarti Centre Building, Indonesia 10160**  
Tel: (62-21) 386 5532 | Fax: (62-21) 384 7517 | [csis.or.id](http://csis.or.id)

**COVID-19 Commentaries Editors**

*Philips J. Vermonte, Shafiah Muhibat, Vidhyandika Perkasa, Yose Rizal Damuri, Beltsazar Krisetya*

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<sup>39</sup> Chin, Chester. 2020. "Covid-19: Stranded tourists in Malaysia staying put; feel safe under MCO." *The Star*. 26 April. Accessed April 30 <https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/travel/2020/04/26/covid-19-stranded-tourists-in-malaysia-staying-put-feel-safe-under-mco>, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> 2020. "Foreign workers can apply online to renew temporary employment visit pass, says Immigration D-G." *MalayMail*. 22 April. Accessed April 30, 2020. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/04/22/foreign-workers-can-apply-online-to-renew->