



# CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS DURING PANDEMIC

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## Introduction

The first cases of Covid-19 in Malaysia were detected on 25 January 2020, traced to three Chinese nationals travelling from Singapore. As part of the national response to mitigate the communal spread and pressure to the country's healthcare system, the movement-control order (MCO) was implemented on 18 March 2020. It restricted most non-essential activities outside, allowing for only necessities, such as household groceries and medical treatment.

To support the enforcement of the MCO, the Malaysian armed forces (MAF) were deployed on 22 March 2020. However, the designation of these new responsibilities raised questions over the extent of the MAF's supporting role. This included discussions over the existing understanding of civil-military relations in Malaysia and the evolving concept of national security interests. The ability to determine the state of such relations will be imperative for policymakers to adapt against similar threats in the future and inform the public accordingly.

## Purpose of the armed forces

Determining the purpose of the armed forces requires an understanding of their culture and system of values, in addition to their respective country's own philosophy and ideals. Military organisations are distinct from their civilian counterparts as their career-long education system reinforces particular forms of system of values and culture.

Historically, then-Malaya's military was born out of the Malay rulers' awareness and insistence on the need for a native population to defend their homeland.<sup>1</sup> This expanded to the First Battalion of the Malay Regiment in 1938, which saw its

first conflict against the Japanese armies. Since the end of World War Two, the MAF evolved from conflict patterns brought by internal security<sup>2</sup> towards a new focus of modernising their conventional fighting force to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Compared to some military experiences, Malaysia did not encounter disagreements over the presumed role of the armed forces being subservient to a civilian government. Instead, much of Malaysian civil-military relations have been amiable since its infancy. This was primarily attributed to what Jalal et al. (2021) determined as the military's overall satisfaction with the civilian government and its leadership.<sup>3</sup> Even following the events of May 13, 1969, Tun Razak, then-chairman of the National Operations Council (Majlis Gerakan Negara, MAGERAN) viewed that a military takeover was unlikely due to this reason. This was similarly reciprocated on the side of the military as then-chief of the armed forces General Ibrahim Ismail declined to assume a greater leadership role in said council. Such relations endured when the military became involved to develop society across political, economic and social aspects in the defence and development concept (Keselamatan dan Pembangunan, KESBAN) of 1971. The success of KESBAN throughout the Emergency period encouraged the broadening of this concept into a comprehensive security strategy (Pertahanan Menyeluruh, HANRUH).<sup>4</sup> This approach, developed in the 1980s, expanded to include the private sector and society to defend the country alongside defence resources and government agencies.

### **The evolution towards addressing a broader concept of security shows how threats are not limited to those involving sovereignty and external aggressors.**

Expanding them as they did since the 1980s granted some degree of flexibility to the MAF. This was notable in their secondary roles as overseas peacekeepers and domestic military assistance. While they play a major role in natural disaster responses, they remain separate from civilian duties under the purview of the royal Malaysian police.

#### **Changes to function of the military since pandemic**

Malaysia deployed the army as part of its Covid-19 response because of the need to address the overwhelmed medical facilities and services of civilian health agencies. The military could provide essential medical services to the public as they possess resources – medics, transportation, infrastructure and communications – that could ease the burden on the healthcare sector.

From the first MCO in March 2020, the military was called to build field hospitals and deliver vaccines to inaccessible locations.<sup>5</sup> Other assignments included the body management team assisting in managing the remains of Covid-19 patients, the rapid resupply team distributing critical medical equipment and the oxygen resupply team, which carried, refilled and resupplied oxygen tanks.<sup>6</sup>

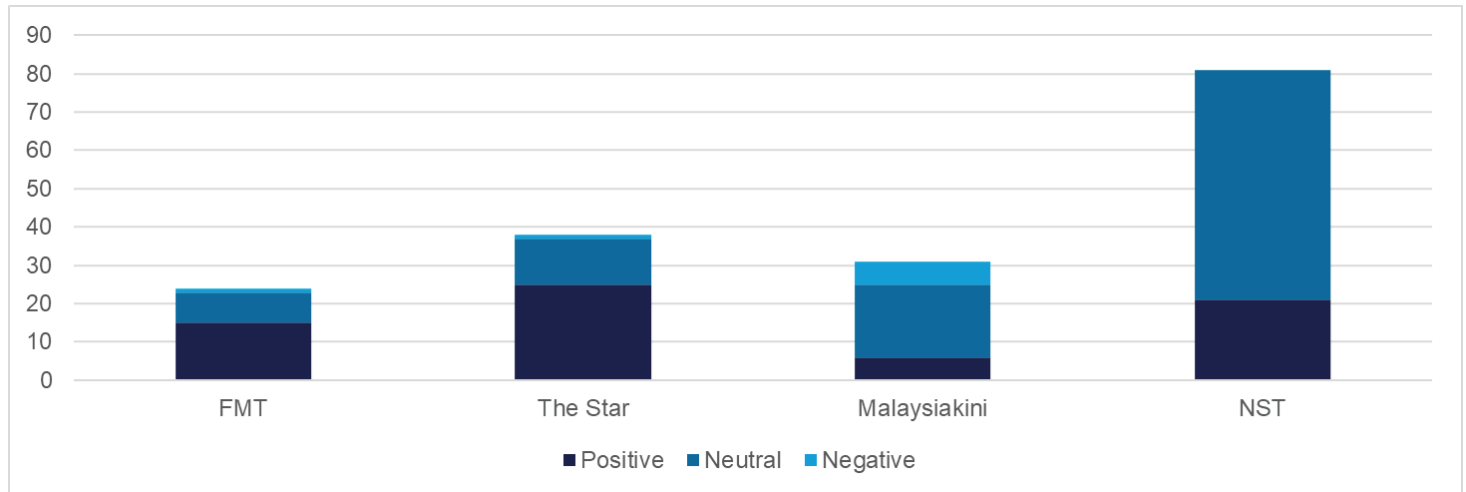
The supporting role also included assisting police and relevant bodies to enforce MCO measures. Military personnel helped enforce roadblocks. Their actions categorised the military as "front-liner" personnel in the eyes of the public, thereby strengthening their positive image.<sup>7</sup>

The MCO measures were perceived as a necessity. However, enforcement was hindered by confusion and misunderstandings surrounding the virus. Azlan et al. (2020) assessed the knowledge, attitudes and practices towards Covid-19 to determine society's readiness to accept behavioural change. Their study found that the majority agreed with the first MCO's implementation and believed that the government's actions contained cases of infection.<sup>8</sup> However, while the study was not able to capture a demographic sufficiently representative of the country, the authors assumed that the high level of positive attitudes were attributed to the swiftness of the initial responses.

Thus, if there were a high proportion of positive sentiments towards Covid-19-related measures, it may be possible to

infer that there should also be largely positive attitudes towards the military from when they were first deployed to present.

FIGURE 1. English-speaking newspapers' framing of Covid-19 and civil-military relations



Source: Authors

A sentiment analysis was conducted on the military's role in the MCO across a sample of English-speaking newspapers.<sup>9</sup> It sought to distinguish the positive, neutral and negative sentiments from the announcement of the military's involvement on 20 March 2020 to the end of February 2022. The results found that coverage on the MAF was predominantly neutral.

Although a preliminary assessment, it reflected the general assumption that civilian opinion towards the military in the country has not changed significantly. Sentiments have been neutral, which can infer both an increasing acceptance of a tacit expansion of the military's role in domestic security and limited negative civil-military discourse in Malaysia.

Negative coverage came in mid-January 2021, when the Emergency (Essential Powers) Ordinance 2021 granted additional powers to the military. Section 7(1)<sup>10</sup> granted the military the ability to arrest civilians in violation of MCO measures.<sup>11</sup> The extension of such powers covered the duration of the Emergency from 12 January 2021 to 1 August 2021.<sup>12</sup>

The announcement created immediate backlash from several civil society groups expressing fears that the additional powers could lead to excessive use of force or infringement on civil liberties. Zaid Malek of Lawyers of Liberty noted that then-senior minister Ismail Sabri failed to justify the use of additional powers as the MAF were not equipped to carry out civilian arrests unlike police personnel.<sup>13</sup> This concern was echoed in the newspapers, utilising words such as "dangerous"<sup>14</sup> or "excessive use of force",<sup>15</sup> to paint an alarmist image of the military and their newly extended powers.

These instances reignited discussions over what constitutes elements of national security and the means taken to defend them. The pandemic demonstrated unforeseen disruptions to the social order, politics and economy. Existential threats are no longer the highest priority for security, rather it is how best to mitigate the effects of the pandemic and to chart a path to recovery. This, in turn, places pressure on civilian authorities and policymakers to decide who are to be included in this endeavour.

Nonetheless, backlash against the MAF during Covid-19, whether by the media or civil groups, remains an exception. This is often not the case in many countries, including the neighbouring states of Indonesia and the Philippines.

## Comparison with other countries

Due to the widespread effects and transmissibility of Covid-19, many countries deployed their armed forces to help contain the spread of the virus. This ranged from enforcing Covid-19 lockdowns or quarantine measures to assisting with the healthcare sector. Similar to Malaysia, the greater inclusion of the military affected the state of civil-military relations.

In the Philippines, the armed forces of the Philippines (AFP) were authorised to support "all necessary measures to ensure peace and order in affected areas" in March 2020.<sup>16</sup> The deployment of the AFP during Covid-19 was a familiar one, reminiscent of their involvement in providing disaster relief, and cemented a high level of public trust.<sup>17</sup> However, the scope of the AFP's powers considerably widened to include security, policing and enforcement roles. Retired military personnel were also major players in the implementation of the National Action Plan and Covid-19 National Task Force.<sup>18</sup>

Such an expansion was criticised. The AFP were accused of participating in extrajudicial killings, arresting government critics and abusing detainees. There were concerns that this would be exacerbated should President Rodrigo Duterte impose a nationwide martial law.<sup>19</sup> Zachary Abuza, a professor from the National War College in Washington, DC, noted that it could lead to further censorship and assaults on free press with aid of the AFP.<sup>20</sup>

Another example of pandemic-related shifts in civil-military relations was between Indonesia and their *tentera nasional Indonesia* (TNI). Top positions, such as the chair of the Covid-19 handling task force and the Indonesian national board for disaster management, were given to high-ranking members of the military, such as Doni Monardo and Suharyanto.<sup>21</sup> The controversial former health minister Terawan Agus Putranto was a former general as well.

However, unlike the Philippine example, the army is not in charge of making any civilian policy, but critics worry about the TNI's growing proximity to the civilian government. President Joko Widodo is known for his close ties to the military, one that Abuza noted grants the space for the military to "claw back civilian power and Jokowi is either enabling them or not standing up to them".<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Wasisto Raharjo Jati, researcher at the Centre for Politics at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences, stressed that the greater involvement could affect Indonesia's quality of democracy.<sup>23</sup>

While there was a period where Malaysia expanded the powers of its military, the reactions against them were more muted. These could be attributed to the fact that the military were never used as a tool to consolidate regime change. On the other hand, the AFP were behind the 1989 coup d'état attempt against president Corazon Aquino. In Indonesia, former president Suharto ruled the country for three decades under a military-dominated government. Without any recent precedent of military encroachment, it might be difficult for Malaysians to imagine their military with such goals.

Furthermore, unlike in Indonesia, neither retired nor active senior military personnel have been appointed to leadership positions of any major Covid-19 task force.<sup>24</sup> To the Malaysian public, key personnel such as the health minister or director-general of health remained to be either technocrats or elected officials. While there were attempts to expand the powers of the prime minister during the pandemic, the military were not involved in such discussions.

## Policy recommendations

With consideration of the ongoing pandemic and the steps towards recovery, there are several recommendations to improve both civil-military relations and prepare against future crises.

First, there needs to be formalised recognition of the expanded scope of the MAF's roles and duties. This entails a change in policies overseeing the function of the armed forces towards one able to account for the evolving security needs; namely, the recognition that security is no longer limited to external threats as it needs to address non-traditional concerns, such as health crises and human security, in a structured manner as opposed to ad hoc

arrangements. Changes to the armed force in terms of structure and goals should remain cognisant of existing strengths and limitations as opposed to making wholesale changes.

Second, multi-agency and cross-ministerial collaboration needs to be supported and enhanced. The pandemic demonstrated how multi-agency collaboration is not only a widely accepted element in managing disasters and public health emergencies, but also a necessity. It allows for accelerated responses and recovery times by utilising best-suited assets for the tasks regardless of the institutions and bodies involved. Such collaborative work should be institutionalised as part of future whole-of-government approaches to encourage a timely flow of information to state units, agencies and citizens. It will require functional relationships with clear roles, channels and methods as insufficient leadership and oversight can create significant challenges, such as bureaucratic red tape and duplication of efforts.

Third, the government and policymakers must issue consistent and explicit messaging. Consistent messaging was key to aid public knowledge and understanding when responding to the virus. The approach and commitment do need to extend across government assets, including the MAF. These can also aid the public's understanding of roles, such as the military's in maintaining security and internal order. This can serve the dual purpose of clearer messaging and supporting cross-ministerial collaboration.

## Conclusion

The novelty of the virus and its effects in such a short duration made it both a difficult and critical task for health authorities to plan strategies alone. The MAF's subsequent role to support pandemic-relief measures presented a means for the armed forces to diversify their role and expertise towards non-conventional means of protecting the country.

**Military assistance is not a novelty in the Malaysian context. While their capabilities made them an exemplary force through their deployment of assets and personnel, they were limited by their predominant focus and experiences on conventional warfare.**

Such an emphasis can go against the changing needs for security and stability, which raises concerns on future-proofing the MAF to meet these challenges and communicating such roles to both civilian leadership and the citizens.

Despite these developments throughout the pandemic, the state of civil-military relations remained relatively neutral and stable. They were able to operate alongside the civilian government and bodies in a supportive role, attracting no significant negative resistance from their involvement. Such a state does present potential opportunities to improve the MAF's relations and leveraging themselves for future threats.

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>2</sup> Jalal and colleagues did distinguish these conflict patterns across three periods; the 1945–1960 conflict era, the stable but tense era from 1961–1970 and the era of social cohesion from 1971–2017.
- <sup>3</sup> Jalal, Ghani, & Ismail, Malaysian military leadership, p. 652.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Razak, R. (2021, June 8). Ismail Sabri: Armed forces to help MOH send covid-19 vaccine to East Malaysia, rural places. *Malay Mail*. Retrieved from: <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/06/08/ismail-sabri-maf-to-offer-logistical-assistance-to-bring-covid-19-vaccines/1980554>
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9 The sample included *The Star*, *New Straits Times*, *Malaysiakini* and *Free Malaysia Today*.

10 Section 7(1), under the authority of Yang di-Pertuan Agong or those empowered by the Agong, allows the military the powers of a police officer under Act 593 of the Penal Code. This is also in conjunction with the powers granted under the Armed Forces Act 1972, which concerns the means by which the MAF are governed and disciplined.

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12 However, the state of Sarawak was exempted from this as they remained under Emergency until 3 November 2021.

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