

March 2020 Issue 1

advisory

IMAN Research



IN THIS ISSUE

*An Untimely
Government Vacuum*

*Responses to Covid-19:
How the carpet rolled out*

*Going Online
Digital Tech as a
Frontline in Crisis
Management*



IMAN Research is a think tank focusing on research and community engagement. Our research areas include preventing/countering violent extremism (PCVE), socio-religious trends and public perception.



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editorial letter

The first quarter of 2020 is certainly dramatic for Malaysia. From political shenanigans to a global pandemic, our country is facing challenges on an almost daily basis. This, in our opinion, is unhealthy for the nation and its people, as they grapple with economic, political and health uncertainties.

February saw a change in government, and the then Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr Mahathir Mohamad's resignation. In an about turn, his protege, Azmin Ali, flew the coop to join Mohamad's former Deputy Prime Minister's new cabinet. The backdoor Cabinet as it is popularly known now, is seen as having committed treason to Pakatan Harapan.

In March, the Covid 19 pandemic affected almost every country in the world. What is apparent in Malaysia is that the untested leadership of Muhyiddin Yasin, the present Prime Minister of Malaysia, and his new and seemingly lacklustre Cabinet, is unwelcome to Malaysians who want strong and fearless leadership to assure them of brighter days.

In this current time of great anxiousness, Malaysia is also facing internal challenges that may destroy the social fabric of the country.

What state are we in now, and what can Malaysians expect in the near future?



Dina Zaman

IN THIS ISSUE:

4 AN UNTIMELY GOVERNMENT VACUUM

6 RESPONSES TO COVID 19: HOW THE CARPET ROLLED OUT

**8 GOING ONLINE
DIGITAL TECH AS FRONTLINE
IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT**

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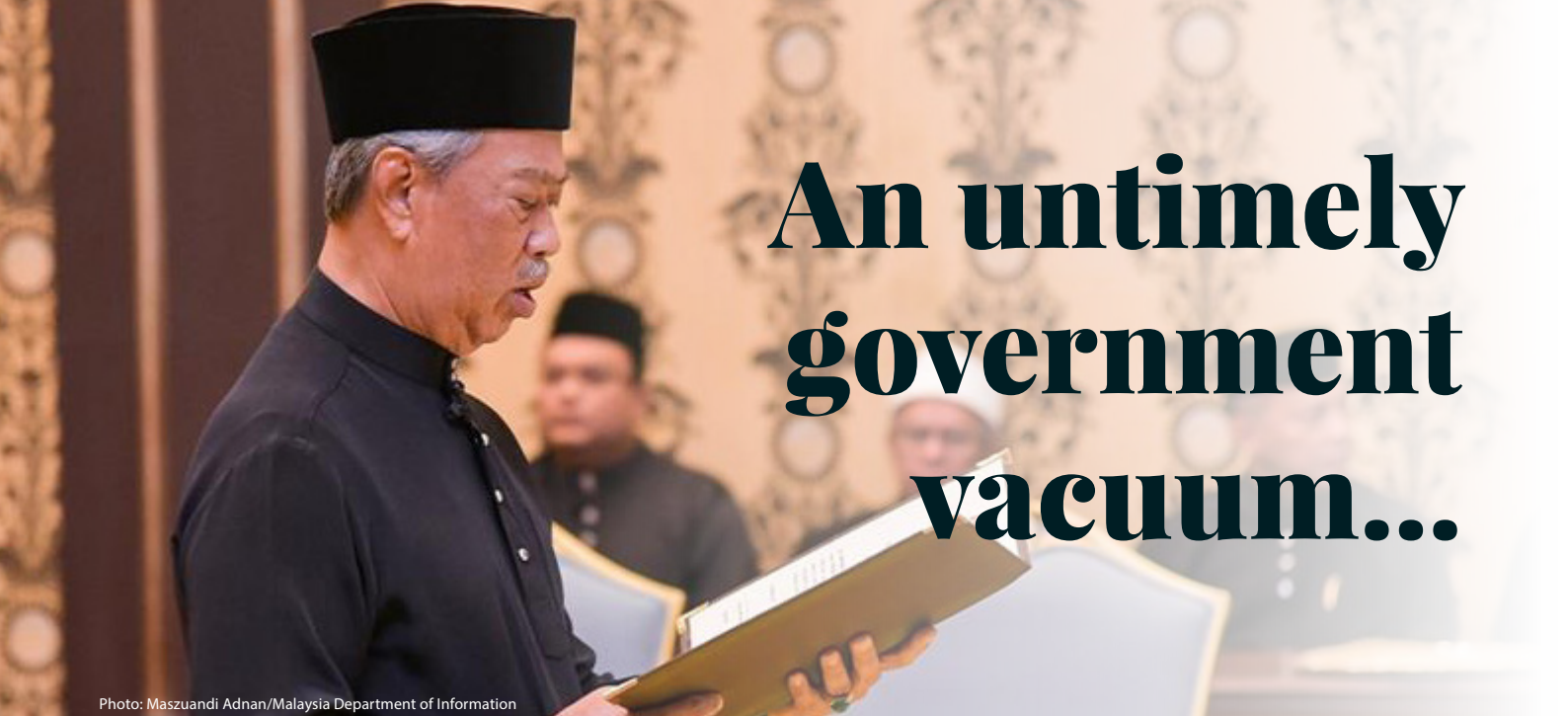


Photo: Maszuandi Adnan/Malaysia Department of Information

An untimely government vacuum...

...**BEGAN IN THE** final week of February with the ‘Sheraton Move’ – a political manoeuvre to form a new government that was orchestrated by members of Bersatu and PKR within the Pakatan Harapan coalition. This was done together with the Islamist party PAS, as well as former Barisan Nasional partners – Umno, MIC, MCA, Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS) and several Sabah-based parties. The manoeuvre led to the resignation of Dr Mahathir as prime minister, and the automatic collapse of the PH government, which was then replaced by the Perikatan Nasional (PN) government, with consent from the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (YDPA).

Undoubtedly, many theories and narratives have been discussed – even debated heatedly – as to what exactly transpired behind the scenes in the week leading up to and following the ‘Sheraton move’. Our individual biases and perceptions may influence who we regard as the ultimate heroes and villains of this saga, but one thing is very clear: the country now faces a transitional period riddled with political uncertainty.

Hateful extremism and security threats

Firstly, the recent political turmoil has further divided Malaysians along racial and religious lines. In cyberspace, there has been a significant increase in hate speech against minority groups. The primary target of these attacks is the Chinese community who continue to be labelled as ‘pendatang’ and ‘communists.’ There was also a spike in rhetoric espousing Malay supremacy – for instance, copious amounts of hate were seen levelled against Malays who support DAP and PH, while taglines like ‘Hidup Melayu’ dominated chat streams. Under the PH government, calls to crackdown on Shi’a Muslims had cooled to an extent, but these have now intensified again.¹ At the same

time, other minorities like the LGBT community and atheists are once again fearful about the impingement of their freedoms under this new administration.

Meanwhile, in Sabah, discrimination against undocumented migrants or ‘pendatang tanpa izin’ (PTI), has resurfaced and the sentiments are strong, with certain politicians playing up such sentiments to secure support among their followers. While all of these issues were present even under the PH administration, IMAN is concerned that the new government may unwittingly provide a conducive environment for hateful extremism to fester and escalate. We view this as a barrier towards achieving social cohesion and counterproductive to existing efforts aimed at preventing and countering all forms of extremism.

Secondly, the political vacuum caused by the abrupt transition of power has made Malaysia more vulnerable to internal and external security threats. There are fears that violent extremist (VE) groups in the region may capitalise on the current instability to spread their propaganda and amass a larger following among disgruntled locals. The country is already an ideal breeding ground for extremist ideology due to long-standing racial and communal tensions, such as the Seafeld temple riots in November 2018 that claimed the life of an on-duty fireman. **Muhyiddin and his government must act quickly to curb the VE threat by focusing on national reconciliation.** There are prevailing concerns that the new Cabinet – mostly comprising members of Bersatu, Umno and PAS – is too Malay-Muslim centric. **As such, unifying measures would go a long way in demonstrating that this is a government for all Malaysians.**

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/632836833418911/posts/2704425212926719/>

TIMELINE OF POLITICAL TURMOIL

FEB 21

- The PH presidential council meets to discuss the handover of the PM post, but ultimately agrees for Dr Mahathir to step down at an unspecified time after the APEC summit.

FEB 24

- Mahathir resigns as PM, and the PH Cabinet collapses. Later, the King appoints him as interim PM.
- Bersatu pulls out of the PH coalition. Azmin and his allies are sacked from PKR.

FEB 26

- The King concludes interviews with all MPs.
- In televised address, Dr Mahathir reiterates call for a non-partisan unity government for all Malaysians.
- PH parties name Anwar as their PM candidate.

FEB 28

- With no clear support for a PM candidate, the Palace says engagements with politicians will continue until someone has a majority to form government.

MARCH 1

- Muhyiddin is sworn in as Malaysia's 8th prime minister.
- PH and Dr Mahathir promise to push for a vote of no confidence in Muhyiddin at the next parliamentary sitting on March 9 (this is later postponed).

FEB 23

- Several politicians from PKR hold talks on a possible new alliance at the Sheraton Hotel in PJ together with members of Umno, MCA, MIC, PAS and other groups.
- Anwar confirms some PH leaders have defected and are trying to bring down the government.

FEB 25

- The King, Sultan Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah, says he will interview all 222 MPs to determine their support for a new PM candidate.

FEB 27

- Dr Mahathir says a special Parliament sitting would be held on March 2 to decide who has majority support to be PM, or snap elections would be called.
- PH questions the constitutionality of Dr Mahathir's call, saying it is the King's prerogative to decide on the PM
- Bersatu announces it is backing Muhyiddin as the next PM.

FEB 29

- PH throws its support back to Dr Mahathir, confident that he has the numbers to form government.
- Muhyiddin has an audience with the King, after which the Palace announces him as the next PM on grounds that he is most likely to command majority support among MPs.
- Dozens of Malaysians take to the streets of KL to protest the "backdoor government".

MARCH 9

- Muhyiddin announces his new Cabinet line-up under the Perikatan Nasional banner.

(Source: Reuters and The Edge)

16th March, 10pm
Prime Minister announces on live telecast that Malaysia will go on a **Restricted Movement Order** effective **18th to 31st March**.

23rd March
EPF chief announces that citizens below the age of **55 years old** are permitted to withdraw RM 500 every month during the course of this pandemic from their EPF account. **Application opens 1st April**.

24th March
Bank Negara announces a **6 month moratorium on all bank loans: principal and interest** (housing and car loans, small and medium-sized business customers).

16th March – Religious affairs department releases official statement on the **postponement of all mosque related gatherings and mass prayers** – also include vital information for **burial procedures for Muslims** that have passed away from Covid-19.

#kitajagakita

Malaysians come together in a community-led initiative to assist those in need.

RESPONSES TO COVID-19

How the carpet rolled out

29 March
Malaysia chosen as part of **WHO's global trial, Solidarity** for **Redemsevir** on effectiveness and side-effects in treating Covid-19 virus on current patients.

25th March, 1.15pm
Prime Minister announces on live telecast that Malaysia will **extend** its Restricted Movement Order (RMO) from **31st March to 14th April 2020**.

27th March, 3.20pm
Prime Minister, Muhyiddin reveals on live telecast the **RM250bil economic stimulus package** to assist the people in financially being able to sustain themselves

**WE STAY HERE FOR YOU
PLEASE STAY HOME FOR US**



22nd March
The Malaysian Armed Forces were officially deployed to assist the police in **enforcing MCO**



27th March
MOH receives a RM500mil funding to continue the battle against Covid-19.



17 March
PDRM implements strict measures for inter-state travel through **roadblocks and checkpoints**.

THE POLITICAL TURMOIL could not have come at a worse time.. What began as a 41 patient cluster suffering from a pneumonia-like illness originating from the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in China on the 31st December, has now escalated to a global cumulative of 731,453 cases with 34,660 deaths at the time of writing.¹ Malaysia alone has reached 2,626 cases, with 37 deaths.² Many are blaming the power vacuum, and the political courtship that followed suit, for the huge spike of cases. Instead of having a government focusing on the pandemic, politicians were spending more time figuring out their political status.³

That being said, in order to contain the spread of the virus, on March 16, Muhiyidin Yassin announced on live telecast that Malaysia will go on a Movement Control Order effective 18th to 31st March, which has now been extended to 14th April 2020.⁴ The immediate public response was panic and mass confusion. We witnessed panic buying all over the country, with Malaysians purchasing stocks enough for weeks or months, and many out-of-state Malaysians leaving the bigger cities and their university towns in an attempt to return home, creating huge traffic and massive crowds at bus terminals, the complete opposite of what the MCO intended to achieve.

A lack of a clear and coherent command from the government also created confusion among members of the public. For example, the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) earlier announced that members of the public are required to apply for travel exceptions permits for those expressing interest to proceed with inter-state travels. Within hours, this action backfired as police stations across major states started attracting large crowds to request for the forms which, in itself, presented as a virus threat. The following day, PDRM rescinded their announcement and everyone was allowed to proceed with inter-state travel, though under very strict measures and checks at varied roadblocks and checkpoints.

As the MCO rolled out and slowly began to affect people's livelihood, the worst affected are the vulnerable communities. Refugees, the undocumented and homeless, are cut off from getting credible information about the ongoing MCO. Questions arise on how they can get access to Covid-19 tests, and how they can keep themselves protected from the virus. In addition, it is becoming more difficult for them to get food and basic needs. The homeless community that relies on soup kitchens and other donations are not getting enough support, while the undocumented are afraid to leave their houses to get food and basic needs due to roadblocks and checkpoints by security forces enforcing the MCO. **Some NGOs are actively**

reaching out and engaging these communities, but the authorities must pledge more effort to ensure that everyone feels safe, rather than isolate this group further. This was further curtailed with the recent announcement by Defence Minister Ismail Sabri on March 28th for all food delivery and distribution for the needy during the MCO to only be done by the government – Military and RELA.⁵ This will be a challenge as unlike NGOs, the government, in particular Military do not have rapport with vulnerable groups who have high distrust of authorities.

Lastly, as security forces are focusing on making sure members of the public are following the MCO through multiple roadblocks and checkpoints, our attention to border security is being affected. In east coast Sabah, for example, there is an increase in illegal border crossings, with people coming in and out of our maritime border, not just on small boats but also on larger ships.⁶ Malaysia has many clandestine routes entering Malaysia, during MCO it is even more imperative that our borders including these routes be secure to ensure that the foreign infection does not enter Malaysia. **Security forces need to continue to monitor and patrol our borders.** Members of the public must play their part in adhering to the MCO, so that our security forces would not be overwhelmed and can channel sufficient resources to make sure our borders remain safe from external threats. As Malaysia enters the second week of the MCO, the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) has heightened patrols on our maritime borders, recognizing the precarious situation the country is in.

Any new administration would require time to adjust as it begins work on fulfilling responsibilities to the rakyat. However, given the nature of the current government's ascent to power, which Muhyiddin acknowledged in his speech, "We may not be the government you voted for," Malaysians are unlikely to remain as patient as they were with PH, and will be scrutinising PN's every move. In every sense, Covid-19 is a baptism by fire for Muhyiddin's government, and there is no doubt that they will be judged on their ability to successfully stem the disease in Malaysia while salvaging a precarious economy in the process. If and when that happens, perhaps Malaysians may be willing to forgive and move on.

1 https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200329-sitrep-69-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=8d6620fa_2

2 <http://www.moh.gov.my/index.php/pages/view/2019-ncov-wuhan>

3 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/26/malaysia-preventable-coronavirus-disaster-political-crisis-muhyiddin-yassin/>

4 <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/03/25/mco-extended-to-april-14>

5 <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/03/28/send-food-for-homeless-to-district-collection-centres-rela-and-army-will-di/1851112>

6 https://www.buletinsabah.com/2020/03/warga-filipina-lari-dari-sabah.html?fbclid=IwAR3cGDjqPjjuOEgoyEkT10Earya12kWaf4lprSoqV7zNyGU3fZB6zZc_33k



GOING ONLINE

DIGITAL TECH AS FRONTLINE IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Photo by Hugh Han on Unsplash

THE NATURE OF the spread of Covid-19 has put public life on hold. Being away from colleagues, friends and in some cases families, can be isolating and people are now relying on their phones and computers to keep in touch with their loved ones, to go to classes, continue their work, and get updates and accurate information on the current situation. The internet and social media have become the substitute for our public life, especially in a time where we need to distance ourselves to survive the crisis.

Internet connectivity and digital technology have become crucial. More than just using it for communities to stay connected, and for authorities to provide updates and information, some countries are using it as an essential tool to contain the spread of the virus. In South Korea, for example, phone tracking is used to identify who to test.¹ By looking at movement history captured from their phones, frontliners can “determine where known patients have been, and test anyone who might have come into contact with them”.

There is an urgent need to make the internet and digital technology available and accessible to all members of the society. Internet data and mobile phones have become a utility, and they need to be treated that way. This is in line with the previous PH government’s

effort to make internet access as a basic right.² Many countries across the globe are also pushing for this agenda, such as the call for net neutrality in the US³, and the global #KeepItOn coalition.⁴

However, there are a number of challenges that come together with the democratisation of the internet and digital technology. Manipulation of social media by irresponsible users, on one hand, can easily lead to disinformation; it can undermine democratic processes and create unrest in society. Alleged data manipulation by consulting firms such as Cambridge Analytica to influence election outcomes undermines democratic processes, and during this Covid-19 crisis, a lot of misinformation and fake news have been spreading around, creating panic and anxiety among the public.

On another hand, isolation while feeling anger, grief and frustration, can be a breeding ground for online extremism. As many people are now stuck in their homes, consumed by fear and anxiety as they watch the world overwhelmed by the crisis, this opens them up to extremist contents, and little by little, they will start believing in them. We’re already seeing many people scapegoating marginalized communities and ethnic groups, putting the blame on the tabligh community for spreading the virus,

¹ <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/covid-19-coronavirus-south-korea-cases-test-data-surveillance-12559252>

² <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/cabinet-approves-rm216b-national-connectivity-plan>

³ https://www.democracynow.org/2020/3/18/headlines/internet_providers_drop_data_caps_as_calls_for_net_neutrality_grow

⁴ <https://www.accessnow.org/keepit-on-internet-shutdowns-during-covid-19-will-help-spread-the-virus/>

blaming migrants for not following the MCO, and so forth. Not to mention the various conspiracy theories behind the pandemic that is spreading faster than the virus itself, inciting abuse against certain ethnic groups, religions and communities.

In addition, surveillance technology such as the one used in South Korea to track suspected patients, raises many questions regarding the potential violation of individual rights, especially on information exposure and movement restriction. In a democratic society, these are serious issues that need to be reflected upon, where as a society we need to think deeply on what (human) rights we are willing to compromise to ensure public safety, and our own survival.

What is certain is that it is urgent to build digital resilience among members of our community. Community resilience is a measure of the sustained ability of a community to utilise available resources to respond to, withstand, and recover from adverse situations. Basically, how a community deals or addresses disruption and in this context, online disruption. In addressing this issue, Malaysia must focus on digital security, and develop the infrastructure, applications, systems and incentives towards creating a healthy digital community. There is also a need to instill good values and conduct, self-discipline and responsibility among digital technology users. This requires effort and commitment from the government, private sector, technology providers, as well as civil society organisations.

UNCERTAIN TIMES AHEAD

IT IS STILL uncertain how the Covid-19 pandemic will affect our economy, public health, and social lives, both nationally and globally. It is also uncertain how our current government will be able to handle the challenging times ahead. The pandemic has brought to light the value of social protection, resiliency and sustainability. Progressive policies that can improve our resilience such as universal health care, humane housing for all (especially for the poor, refugees, undocumented and multi-generational households), universal basic income, livable minimum wages, as well as sustainable and self-sufficient industries are proven to be highly needed in times like these. These are some of the concerns that our government needs to look into beyond the crisis, and to channel resources towards strengthening society and critical services.

Meanwhile, we'd like to reiterate the phrase the Prime Minister used in his recent address: when the going gets tough, the tough get going. Malaysians have demonstrated just that, giving us all some cause for hope. IMAN extends its immense appreciation to all the frontliners – be it the police, army, health practitioners, and other essential services – who are working tirelessly to fight the virus and keep the country running like clockwork at this time. The rest of us can reciprocate by continuing to comply with the MCO, staying indoors, and practicing safe social distancing. At the same time, we should play our part as responsible citizens by sticking to verified sources of information so

as to avoid unnecessary panic and confusion.

The following are two main reliable sources on Covid 19 and the pandemic: #kitajagakita is a “one-stop shop” that informs the public about the efforts that are taking place which have mainly been divided into 3 categories [Vulnerable communities, Frontliners and Need Help (which essentially is for people needing help)]. <https://www.kitajaga.us/> Alternatively, you can also reach out to the National Crisis Preparedness and Response Centre below:

**CRISIS PREPAREDNESS
AND RESPONSE CENTRE
(CPRC) KEBANGSAAN**

Untuk sebarang pertanyaan berkenaan Novel Coronavirus
(2019-nCoV) boleh hubungi :

For any inquiries regarding Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV),
please contact :

Nombor Hotline

03 88810200

03 88810600

03 88810700

atau emel:
or email to us at:
cprc@moh.gov.my

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