advisory

IN THIS ISSUE:

PRESCRIPTION:
STAY AT HOME

DISEASE:	COVID-19
PATIENT NAME:	EVERYONE
TAKE:	DAILY

IMAN RESEARCH

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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

As this advisory goes 'to print' so to speak, Malaysians are asking about whether the CMCO will be extended beyond June 9. It is close to three months now that we are practicing the new normal: work and meetings are conducted virtually, many people are exercising with friends on shared virtual platforms, and dinners are also done over Zoom. Already, there are complaints of fatigue and burnout. Is this how we want to live for the rest of our lives?

In this issue, we look at Malaysia's recovery phase and how health experts in Malaysia are advocating the need for governments to adopt a 'soft landing' response to this pandemic. Any which way you look, all of us will have to grit our teeth: it's going to be rough.

Migrants and refugees remain at the top of social concerns in Malaysia: our human rights ranking will sink even lower than what it was before (and it was shameful, to say the least). Nary a day passes without news reporting of a raid, lock-ups and harm on them. We pride ourselves on being an ideal, caring, Muslim nation. We are in total denial, aren't we.

Lastly, Malaysia saw its parliament sitting not for a day, but an hour. This is truly akin to a K-Drama saga of politically epic proportions. COVID-19 barring, is this the future of Malaysian politics?

Dina Zaman

IN THIS ISSUE:

'CRASH LANDING ON US'?

The CMCO and Malaysia's Exit Strategy

AFTER TWO LONG months under a partial lockdown, Malaysia is finally entering the recovery phase of the coronavirus health crisis. In the past weeks, daily infection rates have plateaued, while the percentage of recoveries are at an all-time high.[1] As such, a Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO) was imposed on May 4 with a significant easing of restrictions and most economic sectors being allowed to reopen.

The CMCO, which has since been extended to June 9, allows Malaysians to regain a semblance of their ordinary lives — albeit under strict social distancing rules and other 'new normal' standard operating procedures (SOPs). For instance, the CMCO sees most businesses, malls, eateries, and public parks resuming operations, though spaces that typically involve large crowds such as sporting events and schools will remain off limits. The government has also advised Malaysians to continue working from home, and to heavily minimise outdoor activities. This includes family gatherings or 'open houses' during Hari Raya, which will most certainly be a sombre affair this year as 'balik kampung' plans are dashed by the ongoing ban on interstate travel.[2]

While the prolonged MCO succeeded in containing the pandemic locally, it dealt a severe blow to our economic and trade activities. Business closures and job losses are just some of the many compounding effects of the virus on our daily lives. As such, the government's decision to restart the economy was ostensibly taken after careful consideration and with financial recovery firmly in mind. A lingering doubt, however, is whether the transition to a CMCO may have occurred too soon and rather abruptly — amidst persistent fears about a hard-hitting second wave, and without ample time for society to adapt to new SOPs.

1   https://www..com/news/malaysia/2020/04/28/ health-d-g-malaysia-in-recovery-phase-as-mco-has-arrested-covid-19-growth/1861023
2   https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/524970

Is it safe to ease restricions?

Foremost among concerns is whether we have reached a stage where it is safe to ease restrictions. The low numbers say one thing, but reality can be a cruel creature — as some countries have discovered the hard way. In recent days, there has been a resurgence of cases in countries that had begun easing lockdowns, such as Germany, South Korea, and Japan — the latter having to impose a state of emergency as a result. With new clusters still emerging and thousands of COVID-19 test results pending, Malaysia is definitely not out of the woods yet.

At the outset, the timing of the CMCO in Malaysia runs contrary to the Health Ministry's own guidelines on the matter. Firstly, the ministry's director-general Datuk Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah previously stated that restrictions can only be relaxed in areas that register no new COVID-19 cases for 14 consecutive days[3], effectively rendering them 'green zones'. So far, this only applies to states like Perlis, Kedah, Penang and Perak.

Meanwhile, the central region (Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan) continues to register new daily cases in the double digits. Some districts within these states also remain designated as 'red zones', while a handful are under an enhanced MCO.

Secondly, Noor Hisham revealed last month that one of six criteria that need to be fulfilled before the government considers lifting the MCO is for cases to fall into single digits[4]. Again, this has yet to happen, especially not in districts with large populations and hence, a greater susceptibility to widespread transmission.

Another criteria that was stipulated involved public compliance and ability to adhere to new norms. There is cause for optimism here, as evidenced by Malaysians' general adherence to the MCO during the earlier phases, and fewer reported violations of late. However, there are doubts as to whether this practice can be sustained once restrictions are eased. In the week since the CMCO kicked off, we have already seen big crowds on commuter trains and at some shopping malls, with no obvious social distancing in place.

Additionally, the government's decision to now allow home visits within the same state and gatherings of up to 20 people during Hari Raya[5] throws up the prospect of another uncontrollable infection spree. With all these criteria still unfulfilled, the potential costs of lifting restrictions at this juncture are still too great, even when compared to the economic rewards.

'Soft landing' vs 'crash landing'

From very early on, public health experts had advocated the need for governments to adopt a 'soft landing' response to this pandemic. That is to say that societies would experience a gradual or incremental easing of restrictions following a lockdown. While Malaysia is on course to achieve the same, the resulting CMCO did feel akin to a 'crash landing' manoeuvre, especially as it was introduced on short notice. Following the Prime Minister's announcement of the CMCO on Labour Day, businesses and services had only the corresponding weekend to prepare for these new norms.

Meanwhile, the SOPs issued by the Health Ministry and National Security Council were sketchy, and not preceded by effective engagement or communication with businesses to guide them on restarting operations with minimal health risks.

After a solid containment strategy in the initial phases, the CMCO's rushed introduction was perhaps the first sign of weakness in our handling of this pandemic. It was quite telling that nine of the 13 state governments in Malaysia refused to comply with the CMCO when first announced, opting instead to maintain the status quo with minor revisions[6].

We need a clearer indication of what Malaysia's exit strategy is or will be. It needs to be configured well and implemented in stages, with contingency measures in place should cases spike again. A hasty return to normalcy, even in the pressing interest of reviving the economy, would negate months of hard work and risk a potentially disastrous second wave. With health services and resources already stretched to the limit, coupled with a worsening economic situation, we absolutely cannot afford to start from scratch again.

3   https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/04/16/covid-19-movement-restrictions-may-be-relaxed-in-areas-with-no-new-cases-in-14-days
4   https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/04/21/how-can-malaysia-end-the-mco-health-d-g-lists-six-criteria-that-need-fulfil/1858921
5   https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/05/13/ismail-sabri-festive-home-visits-only-allowed-on-first-day-of-hari-raya-kaa/1865759
6   https://www.ttgasia.com/2020/05/04/malaysia-govt-relaxes-mco-nine-states-maintain-status-quo/

National Sovereignty

vs

Public Health

Piling Concerns

IN EARLY MAY 2020, immigration raids were conducted in EMCO areas with high numbers of foreigners, namely, Selangor Mansion, Malayan Mansion and Menara City One. These immigration raids were reported to be the first in years.[1] It has been suggested that immigration raids are rarely done in these areas due to their function as shopping centres. Malaysian Minister of Defence, Datuk Ismail Sabri Yaakob justifies the raid as a way to protect our people and country as a sovereign nation.[2]

1   https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/05/03/immigration-department-raids-masjid-india-yet-again-for-undocumented-migran/1862607
2   https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2020/05/03/amnesty-may-be-unaware-of-our-laws-minister-says-about-raids-on-illegals/

However, the raids delivered messages of intimidation and threat to the migrant communities, resulting in the absence of cooperation from them. On May 4th, seven Bangladeshi and Indonesian citizens were reported to have escaped from a quarantine centre in Kuala Lumpur.[3] A few days later, a mass escape of 145 foreign workers occured after COVID-19 screening by health workers.[4] As a result, the isolation process in battling COVID-19 among migrant workers has become even more difficult.

Absence of coordination and weak policy implementation

The escape of 145 foreign workers after COVID-19 suggests the lack of coordination between government officials of the Health Ministry and Ministry of Home Affairs. The police commented that they would need to tighten the screening approach following through this incident.[5]

This situation was avoidable, as the authorities should have expected the repercussions and implications from immigration raid operations. Tighter cooperation and coordination between agencies should have been taken by anticipating the worst case scenario in operations.

There is also the chaos in current policy regulating migrant workers that needs to be considered. Weak regulatory framework, and lack of cooperation between various stakeholders due to conflicting interests and views over the needs of the labour market are among the problems that we are facing in terms of regulating foreign workers.[6]

Until now, Malaysia is still having difficulties in coming to the exact framework to regulate the recruitment of foreign workers. The government is stuck between society's perception of foreign workers and demand of the industries. Foreign workers are needed in certain industries to fill the gap of labour shortage that is unable to be fulfilled by local workers.

However, employment of foreign workers is perceived as robbing local communities of employment opportunities. This perception is making it difficult for the government to navigate through the chaos.

The same negative perception also leaves foreign workers susceptible to ill treatment and exploitation.[7] However, it seems that instead of managing people's perception, the current government has taken actions that incite more prejudice towards the migrant communities in the country.

Spillover effects to refugee community

Recent action taken towards illegal migrants are expected to have some spillover effect on the refugee community. Most of the refugee community in Malaysia entered through human trafficking rings. This means that before they are registered with the UNHCR, refugee communities have no legal documentation for their stay in Malaysia.

Even with legal documentation by UNHCR, those documents do not guarantee their rights to work. Refugees are also not excluded from the negative perceptions local communities have towards foreign workers. Messages of intimidation and threat caused by the immigration raids have already been transmitted and is in a position to wreak havoc with its implications on vulnerable groups.

Moving Forward

In order to maintain public safety, the Malaysian government should tighten security of their border first. This is to avoid the spread of imported cases of COVID-19 to Malaysia. SOPs on receiving refugees during COVID-19 situation should be considered as refugee issues which have been an ongoing problem in Malaysia long before the COVID-19 pandemic started.

Collaboration between CSOs and the government is needed to create awareness among local communities on respecting the role of foreign workers in our country, which includes refugees as well. Battling the negative perceptions of locals towards foreign workers and refugees is critical to ensuring that the rights of these groups are respected.

3   https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/05/05/seven-foreign-men-believed-to-have-escaped-quarantine-centre-in-kl
4   https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2020/05/06/cops-nab-11-of-145-migrant-workers-who-fled-after-covid-19-tests/
5   https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/05/06/cops-on-the-hunt-for-134-construction-workers-who-escaped-after-covid-19-screening
6   A Critical Appraisal of Policies and Laws Regulating Migrant Workers in Malaysia by Devadason and Meng (2014).
7   Restructuring Foreign Worker Policy and Community Transformation in Malaysia by Mohd Amar Aziz, Noor Hadzlida Ayob, Kamaruddin Abdul-somad (2017)

Photo Credit: Guilherme Santiago on Unsplash

CIVIL SOCIETIES FILLING THE GAP:
RESILIENCE IN TIMES OF DISASTERS

IT HAS BEEN about 9 weeks since the start of the Movement Control Order (MCO), and thankfully we are seeing a healthy decline of the infection curve. This has led to a gradual easing of the MCO as a means of revitalizing a dying economy, and supporting the finances of those without wages. Throughout the lockdown, the government and its relevant ministries have been at the forefront of the crisis administering nationwide lockdowns and managing healthcare resources for the Covid-afflicted. Despite best efforts, the MCO leaves casualties that even our government fails to account for. Rising to the call, we see a number of civil society organisations (CSOs) filling in the gaps where needed and lending their aid in a myriad of ways.

Humanitarian Aid

As the lockdown began, governments assured the population that food chain integrity (e.g. grocery retailers remained open) would remain. However, it soon dawned that maintaining a functioning food chain was the least of their concerns, as vulnerable communities who live on a daily wage would find themselves unable to buy food without their salaries. This fact was made worse with some areas under EMCO, further entrenching the vulnerable in their homes. In response, non-governmental organisations, faith-based groups, friendship circles, labour movements, nationality-based associations across the nation have extended humanitarian aid in the form distribution/delivery of food packs to communities jeopardized by the lockdown.[1] In place of a disrupted food chain, CSOs can act as the channel between the public goodwill and the vulnerable community, providing an alternative food source that is both efficient, agile, and targeted.

Government Watch

Other than concrete frontline roles, civil societies also contribute by voicing out against government power abuse and mishandling of issues. A ban on NGO food distribution was issued by the government over concerns of food aid volunteer exposure to COVID-19[2], it was suggested that distributions would instead be managed by the government. This did not sit well with the NGOs over concerns of an overburdened government being able to distribute without wastage or delay. After heavy promptings from the NGO collective, the ban order was soon rescinded with new guidelines of collaboration between government and NGO. Government watch is a means by which civil societies can hold governments accountable; by keeping the public aware and putting public pressure against the government they ensure government actions move effectively in the right direction.

Versatile Repurposing

In the face of a fluid disaster, status-quo becomes unstable and threats fluctuate wildly. Keeping up with the change demands swift and adaptive reactions from societal entities. In a civil society context, this means being able to repurpose operational functions to meet these demands. When COVID-19 cases began to escalate in number, hospitals suffered from a diminishing supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). CSOs from various backgrounds and operations had repurposed themselves to form makeshift factory-lines to meet that PPE quota. Social enterprise "Biji-Biji" and educational makerspace "Me.reka", specializing in sustainable design and ethical fashion, got to work creating a total of 3700 face shields.[3] Tech enthusiasts Facebook group "Open Source Community Fight Against Covid-19 - Malaysia" leveraged technology, such as 3D printers, to create PPE.[4] Refugee-made handcrafted accessories "Earth Heir" decided to use sheer refugee manpower to create and distribute PPE.[5] These examples are just some of the many ways in which civil societies have evolved to adapt to this crisis.

Mental Health Support

CSOs are also providing mental health support during this time. As the virus threat looms and lockdowns anew, the concerns of starvation, job loss, abuse, and death, pressure the nation into panic and anxiety. Similarly, the effort to control the virus' spread via self-isolation has adverse psychological impacts like loneliness, depression, agitation, and even self-harm. Our hospital frontliners, who are working constantly and risking their lives, are under added psychological risk over prolonged exposure to stressful environments.

Notable organizations like MERCY Malaysia or Befrienders have set up mental health hotlines to provide counselling support across the nation as an attempt to manage the psychological threat. In the span of just two weeks, they have received 2309 calls and 252 Whatsapp messages asking for counselling services.[6]

Creating Better Environment for CSOs

It goes without saying, civil societies play a crucial role in times of disasters, often finding themselves filling the gap of an overburdened or underperforming government. Proving themselves capable enough to provide quick-response aid to vulnerable communities, in small organizations they efficiently mobilize civilian resources to aid others. One could almost say that civil societies represent a factor of resilience in a society. Given that, it's high-time we acknowledge how invaluable our civil societies are, and how we can support them moving forward.

For starters, amendments to the 1966 Societies Act should be made to remove strict registration requirements on civil societies. As it was notoriously known to restrict civil associations that were deemed "unqualified" by authorities[7], this unnecessarily impeded the growth of the civil society front. Considering how an NGOs' operational capacity is limited by their access to capital and manpower, governments in the short-term can step-in with capital/manpower support to expand on much needed crisis relief efforts.

In the long-term, an NGO Liquidity Fund should be set-up to meet financing issues that should arise from an economic downturn and the dissipating financial goodwill of the public. It is now more critical than ever that we lend our support to civil societies, as we stand on the precipice between containment failure and societal anarchy, the only societal actors that are protecting us are ourselves.

1   https://aliran.com/thinking-allowed-online/fear-now-hunger-undocumented-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/

2   https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/corporate-politics-and-policy-case-good-intentions-going-astray%C2%A0

3   https://my.asiatatler.com/society/biji-biji-initiative-mereka-produced-protective-face-shields-for-covid-19-frontliners

4   https://www.thestar.com.my/tech/tech-news/2020/04/20/covid-19-volunteers-coming-together-across-malaysia-to-produce-ppe-for-frontliners

5   https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/style/2020/04/19/malaysian-social-enterprise-enlists-refugee-artisans-to-help-produce-ppe

6   https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/moh-received-2309-calls-252-whatsapp-messages-seeking-counselling-services-twoweek-period

7   https://www.amnesty.my/2019/02/21/laws-designed-to-silence-the-global-crackdown-on-civil-society-organizations-2/

EBB AND FLOW FOR SUSTAINABLE COMPASSION

In these difficult times, let's take a closer look at the various fluid stages of empathy that we can adapt based on our individual needs for improvement.

1 ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR PRIVILEGES

If you're reading this from the comfort of your home, take count and be aware of all your privileges. Acknowledge their existence, so you can make wise comparisons. Empathy and compassion starts with you.

2 READ AND OBSERVE TO UNDERSTAND

To empathise is to learn and grasp differences in life experiences. Take the initiative to first read and observe your surroundings about a specific plight - before allowing your judgements to take hold.

3 LISTEN TO "FEEL" THE SHOES

Perhaps "walking" a mile in one's shoes is a feat when you are struggling yourself. Start by lending a listening ear and some time. You'll be surprised at how much just "feel" helps, before you decide to "fill".

4 BE AWARE OF YOUR EMOTIONS

Your value systems and judgements will come into play here. Strive to achieve a balance between your emotions and what you tried to "feel" about others earlier.

5 CHOOSE TO EMPOWER OR KEEP SILENT

Here you will decide if you can channel your compassion for change. If you aren't showing empathy, revisit the waves above to see where you can improve. Do not resort to channelling negativity and imbalance - which brings no change.

THE PAST FEW months have brought in whirlwind change to our everyday lives. Whether you have been able to adapt or continue to struggle in enduring this "new normal", it is our communities that play the part in how our experiences unfold. By limiting our movements, the MCO has brought us closer to home, forcing us to reconsider who and where our communities lie.

In some ways, you could say that our concept of community is no longer who we choose, but the people who influence our lives in ways that may have been invisible to us before. Connected by touch, and still connected without it via social media, we are only as strong as our neighbourhood ties.

We may be ordering from small businesses, applauding our healthcare workers, and donating to those in need, but how will this carry forward? Or will we forget about it all when the MCO is fully lifted? When we know our neighbours are struggling, or we learn how they have lived with dire conditions that make them vulnerable year-round, will this new knowledge change us?

While we are seeing the outpouring of aid, alongside requests for it, does that mean we are experiencing more empathy, or could we end up feeling less? It may be exhausting being bombarded by need in all shapes and forms everywhere we turn, but this is also a more honest look at our lives and what is going on around us. These experiences give us the tools to better understand how resources are connected, how people's lives are structured and how just one slip can impact individuals, families, groups, and industries. Ultimately, what will define our

ability to not just endure this pandemic, but become stronger as a result, is empathy. Community resilience is sustained by empathy, and what better time to capitalise on this than now, when even physically isolating and caring for one's own health is dependent on coming together as a community for the well-being of all.

At home and close to home, we witness the plight of refugees and migrant workers. Exercising empathy is taking a step back to realise that for thousands, a "safe home" does not exist in a country they call home, and for many more, the dream of giving their family a basic, sustainable life requires them to leave home and earn wages of slightly higher value in another country. Sure, they come out very resilient — but do they not also come out emotionally battered from the natural in and outgroup mentality we so easily fall into?

Empathy can be practiced at all levels — during these times, organisations and businesses that are facing struggles of their own too can show compassion within their settings. For managers, retrenchments and pay cuts are painful processes surely — be kind in your approach of announcement and take time to listen. Understand that the approach taken makes a difference in how a worker heals and motivates themselves moving forward.

Take this as the greatest reminder that no matter how much we try to be maladaptive in our coping mechanisms when it comes to showing kindness, this is a shared space. At the end of the day, no one party is mutually exclusive. We are largely interdependent; we share resources, responsibilities, and

vital roles in varied ecosystems. A study by IMAN Research in 2019 to understand ethnocentric traits among the youth population found low levels of empathy within an intercultural setting, suggesting the general inability to accept differences.[1] Therefore, it is crucial for us to learn and observe varied life experiences so that we can better acknowledge our respective differences and privileges.

Take initiatives to explore poverty cycles caused by inefficient policies. Recognise and fight the fact that this is also contributed by institutes of governance and implementation of law, — they allowed for this to happen. Thus, for the young, take the youth rage and negativity to instead understand the root of persistent repetition of similar scenarios. Sharpen all vital edges before choosing to engage blindly.

Empty vessels make the most noise, so choose to be a voice of reason. The continuous animosity we exert to specific people and situations will only unfold a future community of poor substance. It does not need to take a pandemic of this magnitude to evoke empathy. We are better than this. It should only take for you to be a living being.

Empathy is understanding that individual life experiences differ and that is what makes us all unique beings. The human is small when compared to the virus, but you are powerful as you have the choice to live life from the inside and introspect, while the outside influence takes a pause.

Feed the nation in isolation with compassion; and remember, don't get too caught up in the storylines.

1   http://imanresearch.com/publication/believing-in-extremism-what-drives-our-youths/

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