



advisory

June 2021 No.10

IMAN Research

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IMAN RESEARCH

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Based in Kuala Lumpur, IMAN Research is a think tank which focuses on the domains of protective security, peacebuilding and sustainable development. Research is spearheaded by experts with extensive local and international experience in the areas of prevention/counter violent extremism, ethnic-religious issues, social policy and community resilience and engagement such as participatory approach in urban policy and research and psycho-social intervention with communities in or from conflict zones.

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editorial letter

What a discouraging year 2021 has been!

Malaysians have never been timid in voicing out their displeasure, but they are increasingly demanding for a proper state of affairs to return, and encouragingly, the Royal Houses of Malaysia are united in demanding for the Parliament to reconvene and that Covid-19 pandemic be under control. However, these are not enough.

You would be familiar with IMAN Research's briefs and press statements, and we are delighted to know that friends and colleagues in the business community are as concerned about Malaysia. This is not merely about Ringgit and Sen — business wants a dynamic, progressive and successful government and society, which is not what they are seeing now. What would they, as well as we, leave their children and grandchildren, should Malaysia tank?

The review is a recap and an analysis of what has been happening in Malaysia and the region. What is apparent to us is that all of us need to join hands in a partnership, to save what was a functioning country. Feel free to agree or disagree with us at

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Dina Zaman
Founder, Director

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Malaysia: The Return of The Authoritarian State?

Declaration of Emergency

Coverage concerning the declaration of a state of emergency in Malaysia mostly considered the legality and propriety of the current administration, Perikatan Nasional (PN), in engaging these powers. Little discourse has taken place regarding the potential social cost such a declaration could have on our nation's faith in democracy.

Photo credit: Rupajiwa Studio

Muhyiddin Yasin's government has been struggling against accusations of illegitimacy from the onset. This government is also riddled with allegations of incompetence as well as their lack of adherence to democratic principles. From policy and standard operating procedure U-turns, lack of transparency and accountability of managing COVID-19, lack of a recovery program to address the subsequent social and economic fallout and double standards of policy implementations — these are key examples of what Malaysians have to endure. However, the most concerning of all is the declaration of emergency and immediate suspension of the Parliament.

Based on social media discourse, where Malaysian users top 24 million in 2020 according to MCMC, the public's discontent towards the government and politics in general. Twitter and Instagram, the two most popular platforms for youths, have seen a number of online protests towards the government. There is also a sense of resignation towards politics and democracy, though a study is needed to reaffirm this. [This is not surprising, as based on the Center for the Future of Democracy study, 18 to 34-year olds in almost every global region are unsatisfied and losing faith in democracy.](#)¹ A declaration of emergency, therefore, bolstering an administration that is perceived as illegitimate with wide and unchecked executive powers, may widen the already existing trust deficit amongst the youth that democratic practices are capable of addressing their needs.

History has repeated itself in demonstrating that where such trust deficit occurs, populist leaders exploit the belief that the existing

institutions cannot be trusted and that extreme and often violent measures must be engaged to meet the needs of the people. What we should be wary of, as pointed out by public policy expert Professor Andres Velasco, is the contemporary rise of right-wing populism, which banks on xenophobic and nationalistic rhetoric. In a nation like Malaysia, strife with unaddressed racial and religious tensions, we should hope to not leave ourselves in a position that is ripe for polarization and ostensibly, extremist cultivation.

To date, the Yang di-Pertuan Agong has called for the Parliament to reconvene 'as soon as possible' after a special Conference of Rulers meeting in mid-June. He also stated that there is no need to extend the emergency from its current due date, 1st of August 2021. However, the government has yet to show any credible commitment in calling for the Parliament to reconvene, and has yet to confirm the non-extension of the emergency beyond August.

Power Abuse

The first half of this year saw a flurry of arrests in Malaysia. Popular graphic artist and activist Fahmi Reza was arrested on the 23rd of April 2021, following his curation of a Spotify playlist and accompanying artwork satirising the ongoing vaccine distribution controversies concerning Malaysia's Queen. Draconian legislation like the Sedition Act 1948 — a colonial-era relic; notoriously used to crack down on dissent — and the similarly stifling Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 were used as grounds for his arrest. He was later released after a strong slew of

1 https://www.cam.ac.uk/system/files/youth_and_satisfaction_with_democracy.pdf

support in his favour. Later in June, twitter user Chairman GLC was also arrested due to him questioning the RM70 million budget for JKJAV website. He was remanded for one day and was then released.

The police seemingly still operates within the confines of law in the above cases; however, the same might not be said in the case of A Ganapathy — who, after over a month of battling for his life in the intensive care unit, unfortunately succumbed to injuries sustained in police custody last month. Questions and discrepancies surrounding these injuries point to potential abuse at the hands of the police at that detention center. Inquiries are being called and some attention has been garnered to this issue, but the depressing reality is that a life is now lost and makes up one of approximately 18 people who die in police custody every year (statistics provided by the Malaysian Bar Council's Constitution Committee Chairman Andrew Khoo).

Both situations highlight distressing realities regarding policing in Malaysia. The police receive excessive mandates over citizens through draconian legislations that clearly contravene with basic rights. This, combined with the absence of an independent and functional police oversight body demonstrates the sheer lack of accountability the police enjoy in our country. In addition, continuously targeting activists the way this administration has been doing will definitely affect our rating on international measures such as the Corruption Perception Index, which also considers freedom of information.

Interestingly, recent events surrounding a young girl who lodged police reports against

her teacher for sexually explicit jokes made regarding rape in class led the #CancelTimbalanIGP to trend on Twitter on the 27th of April 2021. This is because netizens believed a press conference held by the Timbalan IGP, made light of the comments as jokes. Although Bukit Aman quickly put out statements clarifying their position and claiming the conference had been poorly reported, this reaction by civil society demonstrates a crescendo of exhaustion, distrust and feelings of disappointment amongst Malaysians towards the police force. #rakyatpower

The ramifications of such feelings towards the police? As James Schultz points out, repeated distrust of police officers can cause an “Us vs Them” mentality amongst both law enforcement and citizens. This divide will likely lead to an increased difficulty to carry out effective policing, as the legitimacy of the force may be undermined. Such damage is unlikely to be repaired by scant efforts to place body cams on police officers as suggested by Inspector-General of Police Abdul Hamid Bador. However, it seems, under this administration, the needed structural changes to policing in Malaysia is unlikely to take place.



Photo credit: Rupajiwa Studio

Meanwhile in Sabah

Kg. Muhibbah Raya, Tawau, Sabah is one of the localities put under the Enhanced Movement Control Order (EMCO) from 11th April to 24th April 2021. However, due to the continuing rise of COVID-19 cases in the locality, the EMCO has been extended to 8th May 2021.

This decision has created dissatisfaction among residents of Kg. Muhibbah, who are severely affected economically by the EMCO. A peaceful protest by a group of youths from Borneo Komrad on the 24th of April 2021, was organised, questioning the neglect of the people's welfare throughout the enforcement of the EMCO. A video recording of the clash between the protestors and the police went viral on the TawauKini facebook page, which

ended with the arrest of seven protestors and activists. They were then taken to the Tawau Police HQ and remanded for two days.

Among the people arrested includes sellers and deliverymen, aged between 20-30 years of age. It was also reported that the police had hit one of the protestors, Mukmin Nantang, on his shoulder and chest, while they were in the van on the way to the Tawau Police HQ, witnessed by other protestors arrested. This incident drew criticism from civil society organizations and prompted the Sabah Police Commissioner Datuk Hazani Ghazali to ask for them to submit a police report on the incident.

As of now, many NGOs and CSOs are conducting solidarity campaigns for the protestors and the residents of Kg. Muhibbah.



Border and Security



Ops Benteng by National Task Force (NTF) in Sabah

All attempts are made in order to tighten the control on Sabah waters maritime, specifically on certain districts under the Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESSZONE) that contain many illegal migrant smuggling and staging point hotspots to enter Sabah illegally. Initiated in May 2020, Ops Benteng is an integrated exercise to beef up the nation's border security.

In addition to preventing the spread of COVID-19 by illegal migrants, Ops Benteng is also an initiative to secure the land and water borders, especially from infiltration and human smuggling. These include any attempt on illegal border crossing activity such as abduction, sea robbery by the pirates and underground movement by spies who assist in illegal migrants movement through the identified illegal routes especially in ESSZONE. Ops Benteng was coordinated by the National Task Force (NTF) which is a coalition of 19 security agencies including ESSCOM in Sabah.

Inisiatif Bertanya Khabar (IBK) and Inisiatif

Berkongsi Maklumat (IBM) are also one of the strategies used by the security forces who guarded Sabah waters to prevent kidnapping and illegal border crossing by immigrants. These initiatives, long practiced by the Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN), are two-ways interaction between security forces and the local community, especially the village leaders, to understand the demography, local communities and neighborhood. At the same time, they also help the security forces to identify best approaches to engage with the local communities. This relationship is to ensure long-term cooperation from the local maritime communities to share information and knowledge relating to maritime security in the region. In addition, the IBK also helps to build a network with the local fishing communities to help monitor their needs and give a sense of security and protection against any external threats.

Reopening of Barter Trade in East Sabah

The barter trade on the east coast of Sabah is one of the main factors in the state's economic development. It also creates good economic cooperation as well as friendly relationship between Malaysia and its neighbor

Indonesia and the Philippines. The Tawau Port, for example, is a busy trading area due to its strategic location bordering the three countries.

In addition, Sandakan acts as a crucial transition point to ship food and produce to the Philippines. According to the former Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Sri Shafie Apdal, the barter trade benefits Sabah economy, as more goods are exported out than imported in.

However, due to the pandemic and the Movement Control Order (MCO), on 13th October 2020, the barter trade was shut down especially among traders utilizing the Non-Convention Ship (NCS), also known as kumpit in the local dialect. But on 2nd March 2021, the Sabah government has reallocated the reopening of the barter trade by using the NCS along Sabah waters, including the ESSZONE area, starting from 5th of March 2021.

Although this decision is seen as an attempt to reignite the local economy in Sabah, it is done in a period where interdistrict travel in Sabah is still not allowed, even though the state has moved into the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO). Having active movements in and out of Sabah waters does not only put the state at risk of COVID-19 spread, but it also gives room for illicit activities such as smuggling, kidnap-for-ransom, as well illegal entry by illegal migrants. This contradicts the Ops Benteng efforts to

increase border security, intercept illegal entry, and contain the spread of COVID-19 in Sabah.

Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and New Safe Havens in Sabah

On 10th of May 2021, security forces including the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) and the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) arrested eight Filipinos involved in the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), along with 29 others including women and children with fake IDs in a joint operation.² The data sharing between the Malaysian security forces and their counterparts in the Philippines on movements of the ASG have helped the operation to identify the group's hiding cells throughout Sabah. Although the eight arrested were never involved in kidnapping crimes in Sabah waters and are only wanted by the Filipino security forces, the operation resulted in fire exchanges between the Malaysian security forces and five members of the ASG near Taman Arjuna, Beaufort on 17th of May, a week after the arrest in the same neighborhood.³ Among the casualties is the sub-leader of the ASG, Mabar Binda, who was among the wanted individuals by the Filipino government who was involved in bombings and clashes with the Filipino marine forces in Kompleks Bud Bawis in Panamao, Sulu between 2011 and 2020.⁴

IMAN has been monitoring the ASG who recently has been creating new cells and

2 <https://www.sabahpost.net/2021/05/10/polis-esscom-tahan-8-ahli-kumpulan-abu-sayyaf/?fbclid=IwAR0Tu9IZjE7gNwjU4Ksrk4tUUYPCKaHbgU6TfjKgOA6IhkbdHHp4MJ0h0>

3 <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/kes/2021/05/818021/polis-sabah-tembak-mati-lima-ahli-kumpulan-abu-sayyaf>

4 <https://www.benarnews.org/malay/berita/my-sabah-filipina-negaraislam-210518-05182021183737.html>

recruiting new members in the interiors of west coast Sabah, based on a few arrests of the ASG members by the security forces since 2018.

In November 2018, the security forces arrested a husband and wife couple in Tenom (interior west coast Sabah) for hiding information on the presence of ASG members in Sabah.⁵ Later in March 2019, an arrest involving five men and one woman in Tambunan (interior west coast Sabah), aged between 23 to 63 years old, because one is suspected to be a member of the ASG while the others are hiding ASG members and Maute terrorists in Sabah.⁶ Then in July 2019, another arrest of a 25 year old Indonesian plantation worker in Keningau (interior west coast Sabah) for hiding and giving financial support to Maute terrorists in the Southern Philippines.⁷

The emergence of multiple cells in the interiors of west coast Sabah shows the strategy of the ASG and their collaborators to avoid the eyes of the security forces concentrating in the Eastern Sabah Security Zone (ESSZONE), east coast Sabah who are also blocking the movement of illegal migrants (PATI), monitoring kidnapping and cross-border crimes. The movement of the ASG to the west coast is seen as their effort in searching for new safe havens.

The recent arrest of the ASG members in Beaufort has opened a new narrative that highlights the hiding tactics of the ASG in the interiors of west coast Sabah. Therefore, efforts to disrupt their movements, recruitments and creation of new cells in Sabah must go beyond the ESSZONE to also include the west coast of Sabah, especially in the interiors.



⁵ <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/kes/2018/12/507500/7-individu-terbabit-kumpulan-pengganas-ditahan-fuzi>

⁶ <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/kes/2019/03/542289/polis-tahan-13-ahli-kumpulan-pengganas-di-sabah>

⁷ <https://www.sinarharian.com.my/article/49393/BERITA/Jenayah/16-individu-disyaki-terlibat-Daesh-ditahan>

Global Vaccine Rollout



Malaysia Vaccination Programme

Malaysia's response in addressing the challenges of COVID-19 has been chaotic to say the least. From the multiple Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) to near daily policy changes, the public is confused. At the same time, no clear strategy has been presented on how we will address public health as well as the economic fallout of this pandemic. As this piece is written, Malaysia is going through its third Movement Control Order and we are in our fifth month of Emergency. The infection rate has been increasing since the beginning of the year, due to sudden relaxing of regulations during the fasting month with the opening of mosques and Ramadan bazaars. The situation is not helped with certain segments of the public circumventing the no-travel rule during the Eid festival which has resulted in a surge of infections. Public stress and anxiety is at an all time high.

The national vaccine rollout commenced earlier this year, known as the National COVID-19 Immunisation Programme (Program Imunisasi COVID-19 Kebangsaan, PICK), where one is not allowed to choose a preferred vaccine. However, Astrazeneca was removed from PICK due to alleged public hesitancy. In April, Khairy Jamaluddin, the minister of Science and technology responsible for vaccine rollout in Malaysia, announced that second phase vaccination involving high risk individuals such as elderly will be given the Astrazeneca vaccine. Due to this announcement, the public became concerned as some countries such as Denmark have suspended the use of Oxford-Astrazeneca vaccine due to news of blood clots. Sarawak even flatly rejected the Federal offer of Astrazeneca. So instead, a separate but parallel registration system was opened for Astrazeneca on a first come first serve basis.

May 1st 2021 will be a date to be remembered by many Malaysians in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. Some called it the Malaysian version of the vaccine Hunger Games, with 268,000 slots of Astrazeneca vaccine fully booked in mere 3 hours. That is around 1,400 slots booked per minute. This is comparable to competing for international or K-Pop stars concert tickets. Why do we Malaysians have to compete to get vaccinated? The second round of Astrazeneca registration was conducted on 24 May 2021, with the first three days for those aged above 60 and on the 26th onwards it was opened to anyone above 18. Again, the process was like competing to buy concert tickets. This time, within 1 hour all slots were full, but some have suggested that the system crashed instead.

Many complained, arguing that it was even more difficult to register this time round. People were sharing on social media how they used numerous laptops and a number of smartphones to try and register. Accusations made on social media with accompanying screenshots showing that the registration site used a free cloudflare with a rate limit went viral. Many have been asking the Minister in-charge to explain why a RM70 million worth system was using a free cloudflare, one lead to the arrest mentioned above. Khairy Jamaluddin has apologised for the chaos in registering but no explanation has been given on why it happened or answered the accusation of fraud.

The Minister in charge has now announced that Astrazeneca will be reinstated back into the PICK, since the high turn out rate for registration proves that Malaysians are willing to take the vaccine but anger, frustration and distrust is mounting and this can further derail Malaysian vaccine rollout. There is also a clear lack of consistency between state-

ments put out by the Ministry of Health — essentially issuing a gag order on public servants who produce information to the public as whistleblowers — and minister Khairy Jamaluddin, who asked the whistleblowers to come directly to him with their information so action could be taken.

Many had their eyes on the vaccine rollout as being means for this administration to establish a sense of legitimacy and trust amongst the public. Globally, mismanagement of pandemic resources has led to severe dips in public trust of administrations (e.g of the UK) and therefore the inverse would only strengthen trust in government.

This was heightened by the fact that Khairy Jamaluddin, who typically maintains a high level of credibility and is seen as competent amongst his peers, was put in charge of acquiring and managing the National COVID-19 Immunisation Programme. Moreover, comments made by him prior to the rollout stressing vaccine equity seemed to support the notion of ethical distribution of the vaccine. The nature of the COVID-19 vaccine rollout and on a larger level, the managing of the pandemic, is also a matter that typically receives bipartisan support and could and should have been wielded as a tool to forge political stability.

This trust in Khairy Jamaluddin may now prove misplaced, as his amendment of the vaccine recipients schedule after the whistleblower came forth to include Cabinet members, state executive councillors, federal and state lawmakers and government officials accompanying ministers as political “front-liners” for phase one of the National COVID-19 Immunisation Programme indicates that ultimately, his interests lie with the administration and not the greater public.

Global Equity of Vaccination Access and Distribution

“There is no diplomatic way to say it: a small group of countries that make and buy the majority of the world’s vaccines control the fate of the rest of the world.” — WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus during the opening of the annual assembly of health ministers on 24 May 2021. According to WHO, 75 percent of global administered vaccines are in only 10 countries.

To date, the US has fully vaccinated over 50 percent of their adult population and started vaccinating those below 18, against WHO’s recommendation to only focus on adults.⁸ By May 6, nearly 60 percent of Israelis had received at least 1 dose while 56 percent were fully vaccinated, though this does not include the Palestinian population within the occupied territories.⁹ The UK on the other hand has vaccinated 70 percent of their adult population.¹⁰ These are examples of how vaccination is positively progressing in advanced economies. However, the same cannot be said of others. According to the Our World in Data project at the University of Oxford, only 0.3 percent of doses have been administered in developing countries as of 27 May 2021.¹¹ When broken down into continents, only 2.2 percent of Africa with a population of 1.2 billion people have been vaccinated (Africa makes up 16 percent of

world population). Followed by Oceania with 11 percent. The difference is undeniably striking. The gap between rich and poor nations is being exacerbated by vaccine inequity.

The COVAX programme co-led by WHO, CEPI and GAVI — the vaccine alliance, has been instrumental in pushing for equitable access to vaccines. For many developing countries, COVAX is quite literally a lifeline and the only viable way in which their citizens will get access to COVID-19 vaccines. COVAX is a global multilateral initiative to develop, manufacture and deploy vaccines on a fair and equitable basis. 190 economies have entered into agreements with COVAX. However, to date, COVAX has only been able to deliver 72 million vaccines to 125 countries consisting mostly developing countries, barely sufficient to even cover 1 percent of those countries’ populations. From the beginning, COVAX struggled to enter into firm purchase agreements with vaccine manufacturers and competition from richer nations conducting their own bilateral arrangements with manufacturers complicated matters.¹² To make matters worse, some countries are over ordering vaccines; for instance, Canada ordered 338 million doses, enough to vaccinate their population 5 times over, EU ordered 1.8 billion doses, 2.7 times more than the population and the US ordered doses double to the country’s population.¹³

8 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joewalsh/2021/05/29/most-americans-are-now-vaccinated---but-these-10-countries-are-doing-even-better/?sh=7ce85aae16bb>

9 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2021/coronavirus-vaccine-inequality-global/>

10 <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-55274833>

11 <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations>

12 <https://www.devex.com/news/tedros-calls-out-me-first-approach-to-covid-19-vaccines-this-is-wrong-98937>

13 <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-57362796>



Foreign Affairs

Muhyiddin's Saudi Visit: More Than Meets the Eye?

What if the custodian of two holy sites for Muslims around the world called you and asked for your presence in its holy chamber to talk about anything other than holy matters that Zoom cannot facilitate? It is not a season for pilgrimage and it is still not safe for big entourages to go to places when overall vaccination outputs remain a small percentage worldwide yet Muhyiddin Yassin is in Mecca to perform the Umrah. What is it really about the meeting between Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin and the government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, on such short notice? There can only be so few hypotheses. Chief amongst this visit is one — geopolitical realignment.

As said many times by the Prime Minister himself, the next general election is just around the corner. With the rolling out of vaccines and the seemingly decreasing number of COVID-19 infections, all parties are gearing up for the next showdown. For the ruling coalition, this election is crucial to legitimise their power. A win is a must, and to win big is to spend big but how?

An opportunity granted to be inside the

Ka'bah is often a wish come true for worshippers of the Islamic faith, but it is seen as an effective political leverage for the Saudi government. It is fair to question why the Saudi government is inviting Muhyiddin to pay a visit not only during an unseasonal almanac but especially in light of the COVID-19 vaccination drive that has only recently been initiated globally? It is worth noting that the Saudi government is still trying to weather the recent official U.S. intelligence report implicating the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman with the murder of news correspondent Jamal Khashoggi.

Since winning the US Presidential election in November last year, Joseph Biden's administration has made an important case on the situation in the Middle East, especially on the conflict in Yemen, Iran's nuclear enrichment program and overall tension in the region. Saudi Arabia saw the diplomatic shift it has enjoyed under President Donald Trump quickly being challenged.

What is certain is that Saudi is reaching out to friends and proxies especially within the Islamic world but it is not a new strategy as they had cultivated a relationship with previous Prime Minister, Najib Abdul Razak a decade ago.

From East to Middle-East

We all look at the East in a different way now. Today, Malaysia's once effusive praises for the land of the rising sun is swapped with the vast desert region, the Middle East. The oil and energy funds are aplenty especially coming from the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. Both rulers of the countries have many things in common, one of them being Malaysian affairs, especially with the current administration. While Mahathir's Look East policy emulated the rigour of the Japanese work ethics, our current administration is not an oasis of hope.

Saudi Arabia's petrodollar has been pouring into Malaysia since the 80's for these reasons, both ideologically and politically. 30 years down the road, one must wonder, why are our Arab brothers still so generous after all these controversial years of money politics?

What could go wrong with these friendly gestures really? Multiple high-profile visits of Malaysian political elites to both the Arab countries raise more than an eyebrow, espe-

cially when the administration of Muhyiddin Yassin is perceived as highly questionable when it comes to managing the COVID-19. The Malaysian royalty too was implicated by news of the vaccine treatment. Supposedly, the General Elections will take place some time this year and the Perikatan Nasional camp desperately needs to stay incumbent for its political survival. It obviously needs money to grease up the machinations.

There is no such thing as equal partners with equal strength. The oil money dictates the outcome of the geopolitical interest. For years now, the Middle East has been embroiled in conflicts, protracted wars of schisms as *raison d'être*, dictatorships, to name a few. Hence our concern is more to do with what is of the national interest that is not discussed or made available to the general public pertaining to these visits in the recent months? What type of investments are really going to benefit the population and the country that our leaders are jet setting so frequently to the Middle East, the parliament building remains shut, until further notice.



The Junta Strikes Back

On February 1, 2021, a pre-dawn raid of high profile National League for Democracy (NLD) figures took place by the order of General Min Aung Hlaing, Myanmar's head of the military, better known as the Tat-madaw. The pretext of what is now termed as military coup d'etat was thought to be a case of a prolonged political rift between the army and the NLD-majority parliament headed by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, following the recent General Elections in November 2020. The military junta (accused of genocidal intent by the international community for the Rohingya crisis in 2017) was spooked by the result of the election, accusing NLD and the election commission of massive fraud. The military junta announced briefly that democracy would be restored within one-year's time.

Over the past week, the country saw political tension at an all time high since the restoration of democracy almost ten years ago. Social media platforms and access to free media are now curtailed and monitored, sending out a message that all is not well in Myanmar. With the looming crackdown on street protests, citizens of the country will be socially and economically affected, especially now under the backdrop of COVID-19 pandemic. With the military junta coming on directly once again in the civil administration of the country, the democratic narrative that inspired the nation of 55 million people to participate in nation building is now hanging precariously on the edge of a cliff.

ASEAN members saw what was unfolding distantly, assessing the situation as a matter of internal policy of a sovereign nation, and not wanting to irk the military junta with demands to immediately release political


detainees or with economic sanctions. This wait-and-see approach is characteristic of ASEAN, where some of the member states themselves have a track record of human rights violations and tampering of the rule of law. If tension continues to arise, one can expect the resilient and resourceful people of Myanmar to continue resisting the dictatorship. What is worrying is the resumption of a military junta offensive against numerous ethnic armed groups in the country, which will have a spillover effect of humanitarian catastrophe in the form of internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees fleeing the country for safety into neighboring countries, who don't necessarily have good track records when dealing with such situations. We must remember about hundreds of thousands of refugees already fleeing Myanmar due to the military onslaught during the 1988 Uprising and the Saffron Revolution in 2007.

If the first two month of 2021 are any indication of the year ahead, 2021 does not seem to be a tame year politically for a number of ASEAN member states. The observer can expect continued instability in Myanmar and Thailand as the likelihood of the Military to compromise is unlikely. Malaysia is also unlikely to see any improvement with the emergency expected to last until August 2021. As the fallout of COVID-19 continues, we have yet to see the full political impact of it in neighbouring countries.

end.



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