

Malaysia: From COVID role model to a mini-India



The heroic and heartbreaking scenes at Malaysian hospitals are akin to a disaster movie. An overwhelmed healthcare system and overwhelmed medical staff have struggled to cope with the exponential growth in COVID-19 admissions.

Critics have been put up in hospital car parks, several patients have had to share the same oxygen concentrator, and some resuscitating procedures had to be performed on hospital floors. Doctors have reported that whole families have been admitted together to hospitals and some have died together.

Religiosity capital is now back down in thousands and has been used to keep up with the rising death counts, bodies have had to be stacked up on trolleys and pushed to the morgues. Volunteer undertakers have been handling nearly 50 times more bodies than they did last year.

"Now, I just have no emotion, it's what I do," death has become so frequent that they've become numb," one from the worker said. Malaysia called Malaysia.

Malaysia's biggest COVID-19 fear was becoming semi-island and uniformly, it has come true. Its daily infection and death counts per capita surpassed India's peak. At the end of July, Malaysia's daily cases per million people stood at 315.9 and its daily deaths per million were at 4.97, by contrast, at its peak, India reached 231.5 cases and 3.61 deaths. The country also has the highest per-million cases in Asia, and one of the highest per-million deaths in Southeast Asia.

This is a dramatic reversal of fortunes for a country once deemed the role model in handling the pandemic. Just a year ago, Malaysia celebrated as local transmission reached zero for a few days, gaining praise from foreign experts, academics, and organizations such as the World Health Organization. The Malaysian government's swift actions to implement a full-scale lockdown, invest in testing and medical facilities, and deploy proactive communication with the public resulted in fewer cases than in the rest of Southeast Asia.

Malaysia's director-general of health, Dr Nor Hisham, was given the highest civilian honor and was named alongside the US DHS Anthony Fauci and New Zealand's Ashley Bloomfield as the top health officials in the battle against COVID-19.

But the country's success was short-lived. Government complacency has quickly turned into a self-complacency for containing the virus. The government went on to announce good results of its anti-pandemic measures in 2020 and in August decided to hold a state-wide election in Malaysia's poorest state, Sabah.

During the campaign period, airlines increased flight frequency to ferry politicians and supporters in and out of the state. In total, 257 flights were approved and many were held with little social distancing, media-wearing athletes and health professionals. On election day, 1.1 million voters turned up at polling stations.

Researchers from the National University of Singapore found that the Sabah election contributed 70 percent of cases in the state itself and at least 64 percent in the rest of the country.

In the following months, as the number of cases continued to rise, the government engaged in rounds of denial, stating that the situation was "still manageable" and "under control". Intensive travel was allowed and restrictions loosened in December, although the country experienced a steady rise in fold increase in cumulative cases from October to December.

In January, medical professionals also wrote an open letter to Malaysian Prime Minister Mahatir Mohamad about the expanding disaster at hospitals. If the corruption were not controlled, Bill government complacency meant little effort was made to control it. Restrictions were half-hearted and inconsistent, and when nationwide blanket lockdowns finally came in June, it could not stop country-high infection numbers, with cases reaching 1 million - in a country of only 32 million.

Lack of unified chain of command. Apart from its complacency, the health emergency of 2021 also uncovered the absence of a unified government. The cabinet comprises ministers from different parties who are political rivals and therefore, are mistrustful and uncooperative in their collective work.

Public push between the different factions of the prime minister's party, BERSATU, and UMNO, the largest party in government, have resulted in contradictory decisions and conflicting policies.

In May, the health minister, accelerating, Zaidi Hamid, the public not to link Malaysia's failure to his party, despite UMNO being a member of the coalition government. "It is true that [we] are part of [the] government," [but] most of the virus and advice about COVID-19 do not go through [the] cabinet."

As the situation worsened, as did cabinet infighting. In June, Defence Minister Ismail Sabri Patah of the UMNO party posted a photo of himself with the cryptic caption: "I have closed the front door but..." The image implied that the lockdown measures he introduced were ineffective because Anwar Ibrahim, the international trade minister from the BERSATU party, continued to allow non-essential industries to operate.

Many Malaysians were frustrated after local media outlets reported that non-essential businesses, such as the temporary closure of some shops and banners and the issuance of police permits, were in transit, have only when they were not needed.

Loss of legitimacy. Another contributing factor to the massive COVID-19 crisis is the government's diminishing legitimacy, which has resulted in low public compliance with any pandemic measures. Instead of acting as role models, ministers and elected officials have consistently broken COVID-19 rules, giving rise to cynicism and double standards.

Ministers are exempted from the complex 14-day quarantine period upon return from overseas, while members of parliament have been allowed to travel abroad frequently, not abiding by lockdown restrictions, including ministers dining at restaurants when it was not allowed. When they have been caught in violation of the anti-pandemic measures, punishment has

been far less than what ordinary Malaysians would have faced. This incident has not grown into a public movement, but has discouraged many Malaysians from voting by the COVID-19 rules. Late-night and late-state travel have been banned as a form of defiance.

The anger and frustration came to a boil when hundreds of newly young protesters took to the streets to demand the prime minister's resignation. The only, fast-turning banners, placards, black flags, and effigies of "Mencut" (Cut), passed through Kuala Lumpur's major roads on July 31.

But perhaps the most significant indication that the government has lost legitimacy is that Malaysians are increasingly looking to each other for help as the pandemic has left them impoverished and desperate.

Many, including the prime minister, believe that the poorest 40 percent of Malaysian society, called the B40 (bottom 40 percent), has been expanded to 500, over-agriculturalists have fallen for the first time since 2010, eating across all demographics. Suicide cases have soared, and the number of child deaths before has risen to concerning levels. Millions are out of work and trapped at home with little money.

Having lost faith that the authorities can provide for them, families have started putting up white flags to ask their neighbors for help. While communication has been established to provide for these struggling to cope. Ordinary people have started food banks to help others.

One minister visited the outermost town of Johor Bahru set up a rock in front of her shop as a makeshift food bank. Though many came and took what they needed, the supplies never seemed to run out.

Then the rubber that the food bank was quickly replenished by non-essential and needless donors on her behalf.

Stories like this one demonstrate Malaysia's resilience and the strength of their community spirit. When the pandemic is all over, those who arrive will celebrate this spirit for helping them pull through, and not the failed policies of chaotic government.

Aljazeera

The African Union, Israel and the futility of appeasement

For decades, African countries have supported the Palestinian liberation struggle against Israel, seeing it as a struggle with their own anti-colonial movements. Like the African Union, Israel has not hesitated to criticize Israeli international law violations and occupation of Palestinian lands.

Most recently, Chairperson of the African Union Commission Mouwene Faki Mahamat condemned Israel's war on Gaza and its violent attacks against Palestinians in Jerusalem. So why on earth did the commission grant Israel the privilege of an observer status at the AU just two months later?

It is not the Israeli but the African Union Commission that has a long record of support for the rights of Palestinians. If anything, Israeli negotiators have shifted from what international human rights organizations have called war crimes and have persisted in their colonial policies, despite African condemnation.

In South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa has argued, Israel is creating an apartheid system in Palestine akin to apartheid South Africa's colonization, in the form of flight, exclusively Jewish settlements, guns on mind.

Some South African and Israeli observers have denied Israel's racist regime "for worse" than South Africa's 1948-1994, given the large-scale ethnic cleansing that has taken place in Palestine.

All of this begs the question: Why would Mahamat, a seasoned negotiator, allow such a racist and gross decision to be made without the support of African states? This is especially disturbing considering that an absolute majority of African states have only recently renewed their trust in Mahamat's leadership re-electing him for another four-year term.

Already, some major countries from Algeria to South Africa have refused Israel's admission to the AU, and many have refused to accept public with the AU, demanding the AU to take a stand on the issue of Israel's apartheid and apartheid.

Now, I realize that a number of African and Arab leaders have up

posed Israel as a way to reach out to the United States. They realize that Israel has a major role to play in the world, and that it is not only the decisions of the world's superpowers but their own.

Indeed, such pragmatism is not a new thing. Israel has worked for the likes of Sudan in getting US sanctions lifted after it began normalizing relations with Israel.

In other words, US leaders have encouraged such pragmatism as a way to pay for Israel's present administration, which came to pay for Israel's military and strategic gain.

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China eyes Afghanistan at a pivotal moment

From P

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