

Reporting from the Frontline

Possibilities and Limits of Southeast Asian Media Responses to Covid-19



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Reporting on Covid-19 amidst Political Upheaval in Malaysia Truth in the time of the coronavirus

Abstract

2020 in Malaysia has been tumultuous – from a political coup to state elections to several state governments falling and, most recently, a push from the administration to declare a political emergency as warring political parties and factions insist they command parliamentary support. Reporting on the Covid-19 public health crisis during this period then becomes more complicated, with the electorate accusing their leaders of politicking when they should be focused on the pandemic. In my presentation I will examine key events such as the May Day immigration raids, key government and opposition press conferences, the Sabah state elections and of course the initial political coup that kickstarted the year of instability.

Reporting on Covid-19 amidst Political Upheaval in Malaysia: Truth in the time of the coronavirus

2020 has been a tumultuous year for Malaysia. Like many nations, it has had its hands full battling the coronavirus pandemic. Yet, it has also faced unprecedented political instability, the erosion of civil liberties, and increasing vulnerability for oppressed minorities and women.

Malaysia's first serious COVID-19 cluster emerged in February, after a large religious meeting [saw scores of cases recorded](#) (Sukumaran 19 March, 2020). Just weeks after, the ruling Pakatan Harapan administration – which came into power via the ballot box May 2018 – was turfed out following a political coup. The new Perikatan Nasional government, made up of splinter factions from Pakatan Harapan as well as members of the previous Barisan Nasional administration, were soon forced to declare a nationwide lockdown that saw businesses shuttered and people forced to shelter in place. The Royal Malaysian Police played a central role in enforcing civilian compliance, arresting hundreds daily.

Following this, case numbers were briefly under control – despite hefty economic consequences – until the Bornean state of Sabah was pushed into elections following attempts at a political power grab. The movements of voters and politicians saw numbers skyrocket, with Malaysia reporting a total of [83,475](#) cases recorded as of mid-December (Pfordten and Ahmad 15 December, 2020).

As the country moved from a full movement control order to more relaxed iterations: enhanced movement control orders, targeted movement control orders, relaxed movement control orders – an alphabet soup that, in brief, allowed business to resume, more socialising and interstate travel.

Meanwhile, politics remained fraught. A razor-thin parliamentary majority held by the ruling Perikatan Nasional coalition was fiercely defended, while party allies debated their loyalties. Pakatan Harapan, the strongest opposition in the nation's history, pledged to dethrone the coalition with leader Anwar Ibrahim claiming a “strong, formidable and convincing” number of lawmakers had thrown their support behind him.

During this time the Malaysian populace became more restive, accusing politicians of prioritising power over hardy and robust governance. Oppressed groups were made more vulnerable during the year, claimed watchdogs, with little done to mitigate dire straits.

Migrant workers at the forefront

Home to several million documented migrant workers and many more undocumented, Malaysia's laissez-faire attitude towards trafficking and people smuggling has earned it criticism in the US State Department's annual Trafficking in Persons report, where it is placed on the Tier 2 watchlist.

Most recently, US Customs and Border Protection banned imports from Top Glove, a leading Malaysian listed company that produces protective gear including rubber gloves, over forced labour concerns. Although Top Glove has gone from strength to strength due to a rising demand for gloves against the backdrop of a global pandemic, the company's treatment of migrant workers has come under severe scrutiny amidst reports COVID-19 infections amongst workers halting production output, poor accommodations and faulty safety protocols.

In early December, Human Resource Minister N. Saravanan criticised the factories for “[deplorable](#)” conditions after earlier defending Top Glove, and pledged to go after companies that

do not treat its foreign workers in accordance with the law (Ayamany 25 November, 2020).

Top Glove is not an outlier, say rights groups – since the pandemic, reports of foreign workers going hungry, not being paid, forced to work or living crammed like sardines in their accommodations have been rampant.

In May, the government launched immigration raids that saw thousands of migrant workers and even asylum-seekers arrested and locked up in detention centres, leading to coronavirus outbreaks due to overcrowding as well as a fatality – a 67-year-old man who was reportedly a stranded tourist. The International Detention Coalition reported that minors as young as four-years-old had been placed in detention and tested positive for the coronavirus.

I was present at the first of these raids in a Covid-19 ‘red zone’ in downtown Kuala Lumpur on International Workers Day. One informant sent me a video of the police from his vantage point, while another told me he had been ordered to stop observing the police and shut his windows.

Soon after, I was summoned by the police for questioning regarding my coverage of the event. I was questioned on what I had seen at the scene, my definition of a human rights violation, and whether I was aware that some of the migrants targeted by state apparatus were undocumented.

During the May-June immigration swoops, the government said that detainees who did not have the coronavirus would be deported while those who tested positive would be treated and then subsequently deported. Meanwhile, others who commented on the matter - most notably [broadcaster Al Jazeera](#) - were questioned by the police. In Al Jazeera’s case, the government threatened to pull work permits and deported a migrant worker informant (Al Jazeera, 10 July 2020).

Civil liberties at risk

2020 also saw Malaysian civil liberties at risk of regression. In just one year, scores of activists, opposition leaders and journalists were investigated under a slew of laws to do with public order, ‘insult’ or alleged disinformation, including human rights defender and top lawyer Ambiga Sreenevasan, anti-corruption advocate Cynthia Gabriel, radio personality Patrick Teoh, refugee rights activist Heidi Quah, opposition parliamentarians Xavier Jayakumar and Sivarasa Rasiah, student activist Wong Yan Ke, and reporters from news portal [MalaysiaKini](#) and broadcaster Al Jazeera.

Watchdogs warned of a return to the ‘bad old days’ where the previous administration used archaic anti-free speech laws such as the Sedition Act and the Official Secrets Act liberally to clamp down on dissent, pointing at alarming statistics such as the tripling of investigations into allegedly seditious activity this year as compared to the last. These investigations act as a deterrent for criticism, said analysts, as well as serving as a distraction from issues of governance and policy. One such case, the [banning of a book](#), on the 14th elections titled ‘Rebirth, Resistance and Hope in New Malaysia’ due to an “insulting” cover that may be “prejudicial to public order” saw all its contributors (including myself) [questioned by the police](#) on our intentions.

Government moves such as refusing to debate the national human rights commission’s annual report in report and defended use of the Sedition Act in the name of public harmony also attracted scrutiny. Certain media outlets are still not allowed to attend key press conferences, and ‘official’ WhatsApp groups run by political staffers wilfully exclude foreign press.

Civil society alliance [CIVICUS](#) listed Malaysia as an ‘obstructed’ space in a recent report, saying that the government had used the pandemic as a pretext to restrict civic spaces and that civil

society had not been to push back or mobilise effectively due to the restrictions on movement and gatherings (CIVICUS 2020).

At the same time, xenophobic hate speech directed towards refugees – particularly the Rohingya – increased during the lockdown months, with social media being the main battleground. Petitions in favour of refoulement were signed, and prominent activists were threatened with violence. However, action was not taken against these remarks, causing Malaysians to note not just perceived double standards in prosecution, but also a distinct us/them division where locals remained under state protection and oppressed foreigners did not.

Women in precarious situations

As with most societies, women form the backbone of Malaysian community – from unpaid care work to an over-representation in key industries affected by the movement control order.

Over the past year, rights groups such as the Women’s Aid Organisation noted an increase in distress calls to both its WhatsApp and phone hotlines, while reproductive rights groups said a 48% increase in calls from women seeking access to safe abortions had occurred during the lockdown.

Initially, the government’s response was lacklustre: the Women’s Ministry released a series of infographics suggesting women dress attractively, refrain from nagging and use a high-pitched, sweet voice like cartoon character Doraemon when speaking with their husbands.

Naturally, this advice was roundly criticised for its insensitive, victim-blaming approach to addressing domestic violence. Months later the [government allocated 21 million ringgit](#) to support and service centres for domestic violence survivors, although groups expressed the concern that the approach was a stopgap measure and not sufficiently holistic, recommending instead well-resourced crisis hotlines and more regular investment in domestic violence responses (Sheng 24 November, 2020).

Once again, in the face of the pandemic and strict distancing rules rights groups took innovative approaches to getting the word out, such as the Women’s Aid Organisation which set up a ‘[Girls Take Over](#)’ programme to allow youths to speak on key issues. One member of the network, 14-year-old Nadiah, noted that there wasn’t enough help for children going through domestic violence, compounded by “no national rules stating what services children who see violence at home should receive.”

What next for Malaysia?

There has been marked pushback from civil society organisations which have had to innovate in times of COVID-19. Online protests using the hashtag [#MigranJugaManusia](#) (migrants are also human) have proliferated, while rights groups Amnesty International launched its [Unsilenced campaign](#) this month: an online gallery of films, theatre, art and events banned or investigated by the government.

Political unrest is expected to continue as new formations and alliances are discussed and weighed by warring factions – how this will play out while the fledgling government struggles to keep Covid-19 under control will heavily depend, say experts, on access to a vaccine.

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Bio Note

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