

Malaysia Political Changes amid Covid-19

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to examine Malaysian's perspective on political changes in Malaysia during the Covid-19 pandemic. Not only did the 2018 election return Mahathir to power, but it also ended the six-decades-long one-party hegemony of Barisan Nasional (BN). Yet Mahathir's return to power is not only potentially transformative for Malaysian domestic politics. It also has far-reaching strategic implications. Similar to previous elections, the battle lines of GE14 will be drawn mainly on domestic issues rather than foreign affairs. In fact, there is a dearth of scholarly literature examining the precise relation between Malaysia's foreign policy and general elections. Domestically, the victory of Pakatan Harapan (PH) to win 2018 National Election had paved a way for several changes in the nation. However, after 22 months the PH government collapsed amidst a dramatic series of events in February 2020; with major issues of failure in fulfilling their manifesto. A new government overthrew the PH ruling side when one of the parties withdrew from the PH coalition, forming new government consisting Muhyiddin's new Perikatan Nasional (PN). Ironically, this new government is argued to survive the immense internal and external challenges it faces in the coming months due to Covid-19 pandemic. Fundamental policies in managing the pandemic brings crucial accountability that highlighted their governance credibility. This study thus focuses on the perception of the Malaysian community amidst the changes towards this political scene. To understand this, interviews and questionnaires were adopted online which involved 950 respondents randomly selected. The data was then analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software application. The results show that the

respondents are well informed, knowledgeable and aware of political change issues as the pattern is fairly consistent by sex, age, and ethnic grouping. Findings from this study provide insight into the importance of awareness in generating political awareness and public response towards policy and practices related to the government. Furthermore, the study captures what it means by political change for the respondents. It is important for future analyses to investigate this question and to enhance more study related in understanding of Malaysian politics.

Keywords: Political Change-Awareness –Health Security- Covid-19.

Introduction

After winning the 2018 General Election, the winning coalition Pakatan Harapan consisted of PKR (Parti Keadilan Rakyat), DAP (Democratic Action Party), National Trust Party, and BERSATU party. The victory plummeted to 22 months of governing power, leading to its failure to endure what was more to come. The failure of Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition party to survive Malaysian politics is very much due to its fiasco in fulfilling the 100 Manifestos before the election to win the mind and heart of the voters. Some of the manifestos were promised by themselves to the voters, set to be fulfilled before 100 days of the Pakatan administration. Furthermore, before the change of power, Mahathir, the newly reintroduced prime minister has opted to restructure not only the Cabinets but national policy in favour of justice and transparency. On the other hand, the then opposing parties UMNO and PAS was in favour of Malay-Muslim hegemony over multi raciality. 1MDB scandal has always been portrayed as core issue involving the previous Prime Minister Najib and had acted as main factor that change the electoral result. Malaysia under Mahathir may quickly implement anticorruption reforms. Internationally, Malaysia shall impact ASEAN in many way especially to prove its transparency and democratic stand. Yet ASEAN-Malaysia relations are not merely a domestic political controversy, as it has strategic implications for Southeast Asia as well. Regionally, much to be talked about the side effect of this change to neighboring ASEAN countries mainly Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand and Cambodia. Clearly, the water did not stop at the watergate and it flows to neighboring region politically, economically and socially. The question on how political change in Malaysia affect Indonesia cannot be answered due to a new operational environment facing ASEAN Countries which is Covid-19. If Prime Minister Muhyiddin's new coalition favours specifically Malay hegemony, then it is clearly affecting relation ties with Indonesia due to Malay Nusantara concept which was once championed by Sukarno.

Muhyiddin is the president of the Malaysian United Indigenous Party (BERSATU), now is leading a new governing coalition namely the Perikatan Nasional (PN), comprising of the Malaysian United Indigenous Party, Malaysian Islamic Party and Gabungan Bersatu Sabah. The United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) reaffirmed in July 2020 that it would not join but would carry on lending its support for the coalition and remain a part of the PN federal government. This coalition thus replaced the previous 22-month governing coalition Pakatan Harapan (PH). PN consist of Malaysian United Indigenous Party (PPBM), Barisan Nasional United Malay National Organisation (UMNO, Malaysian Chinese Party, Malaysian Indian Congress(MIC), Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and Gabungan Party Sarawak (GPS). The fall started in 23 February 2020, when BERSATU and a PKR splinter led by Azmin Ali resolve to leave the governing PH coalition and started negotiating with parties such as UMNO and PAS to form an alternative government. A day after, Mahathir resigned as prime minister, leaving the King to only appoint him as an interim prime minister, before any firm decision to be

made. Between February 25 and 28 the king then had conducted interviews with all the members of Parliament to determine who might command the majority. Later Mahathir said he had the majority, but the king decided to appoint Muhyiddin believing he has the parliament's confidence. After a week of uncertainty and to the surprise of many, it was not in fact Mahathir but PH defector Muhyiddin Yassin who was asked by the country's King to form a government, in the process of becoming Malaysia's eighth prime minister.

Muhyiddin was sworn in on 1 March, with the cabinet formed and sworn on 10 March. He has tried to please his new partner through his cabinet appointment but those appointment do not reflect the relative strength of PN parties in Parliament. The government now consist of 109 members where 42 is BN, 31 is PPBM, 18 PAS, 18 GPS and 2 independents. On the other hand, the opposition consist of 108 members.92 PH and Mahathir supporters from PPBM 16.

It is important to note that the crisis has revealed several factors that affect Malaysian politics over the medium to long-term. First, PH's (Pakatan Harapan) electoral viability has diminished and will likely remain poor for the foreseeable future, given their history in failing to fulfill their manifesto. Second, while the ruling government PN may be electorally viable for the time being, it will face fundamental difficulties governing, as its essentially Malay-unity composition is highly vulnerable to legitimacy issues and internal strife. There is, in short, a deep impasse in Malaysian politics in which neither side of the country's de facto two-coalition system appears viable as an effective governing entity in its current state. This suggests ongoing political instability, as well as inaction on several of Malaysia's pressing economic and social issues. This perspective begins with a brief review of how Malaysia arrived at this impasse, after which the focus turns to the current state of the two dominant coalitions and what may lie ahead.

A ban on mass gatherings, due to concerns over the spread of COVID-19, will limit anti-government protests by PH supporters. Second, the consequences of the new government are UMNO and PAS will pressure Muhyiddin to allow them greater say over government policy, emphasising Malay-Muslim causes. Thirdly, if UMNO and PAS leave the PN coalition, the king may have to call for a snap General Election.

The Silver lining Pandemic that Helped Muhyiddin's Accountability

The world is facing a global pandemic of Coronavirus Disease 19 (COVID-19) like never before. It is part of a health security defined as the activities required to minimize the danger and impact of acute public health events that could endanger the collective health of populations living across geographical regions and international boundaries. Health security is a concept or framework for public health issues which includes protection of national populations from external health threats such as pandemics (Aldis, 2008). The impact at global level is very severe with now 783,360 confirmed cases, 37,203 confirmed deaths at 206 countries (including areas and territories). Covid-19 is an infectious disease caused by new coronavirus. Most people who were infected with this disease had experienced difficulties in breathing. Those vulnerable to this disease are older people with underlying medical problems such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, severe respiratory disease, and cancer. WHO is trying with some treatments for covid-19 due to no specific vaccines or treatments. Covid-19 is not only pandemic but tragic.

In any crisis, leaders have two equally important responsibilities: solve the immediate problem and keep it from happening again. The Covid-19 pandemic is a case in point. We

need to save lives now while also improving the way we respond to outbreaks in general. The first point is more pressing, but the second has crucial long-term consequences. This is no exception to Muhyiddin government. Awareness of health issues especially on Covid19 is a global phenomenon. As of April 2020, globally 823 626 confirmed (72 736) 40 598 deaths (4193) (MOH, 2020). After series of new cluster cases of the pandemic, people began to understand this contagion and its role in state's economic and social degradation whilst affecting various policies and pressures that have been taken during the course of this pandemic. The spread of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) has already taken on pandemic proportions, affecting over 100 countries in a matter of weeks. A global response to prepare health systems worldwide is imperative. These factors might be one of the pushes that gave birth to the dramatic political change led by Muhyiddin, the current Prime Minister of Malaysia. This change occurred during Covid-19 pandemic, with pursuit to address public health and attention had deliberately transcend political cleavages in order to produce widely shared pro-social health statements. The pandemic might help keep Malaysia's Muhyiddin in power.

Governments will not be able to minimize both deaths from coronavirus disease and the economic impact of viral spread. Keeping mortality as low as possible will be the highest priority for individuals; hence governments must put in place measures to ameliorate the inevitable economic downturn. A key issue for epidemiologists is helping policy makers decide the main objectives of mitigation—e.g., minimising morbidity and associated mortality, avoiding an epidemic peak that overwhelms health-care services, keeping the effects on the economy within manageable levels, and flattening the epidemic curve to wait for vaccine development and manufacture on scale and antiviral drug therapies. Such mitigation objectives are difficult to achieve by the same interventions, so choices must be made about priorities (Anderson, 2020). For COVID-19, the potential economic impact of self-isolation or mandated quarantine could be substantial, as occurred in China. This includes global health problems such as SARs, MERs and COVID19. As a result, various international health conventions led by WHO appeared in the 21st Century. Health agenda has expanded to include global concerns: human population growth, atomic weapons, recycling, fossil medical dependency, biodiversity, etc.

Public health and social measures are measures or actions by individuals, institutions, communities, local and national governments and international bodies to slow or stop the spread of COVID-19. These measures to reduce transmission of COVID-19 include individual and environmental measures, detecting and isolating cases, contact tracing and quarantine, social and physical distancing measures including for mass gatherings, international travel measures, and vaccines and treatments. While vaccines and specific medications are not yet available for COVID-19, other public health and social measures play an essential role in reducing the number of infections and saving lives (WHO, 2020). WHO has described four levels of COVID-19 transmission. These are countries or local areas with: 1. No cases reported. 2. Sporadic cases. 3. Clusters of cases (grouped in place and time), or 4. Community transmission. Countries are putting in place a range of public health and social measures in different combinations and at varying times in the local evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Malaysian government is in line with WHO focuses that: States must prevent stigmatization and discrimination of refugees and migrants due to measures implemented during COVID-19 response operations. States must provide refugees and migrants, irrespective of their legal status, access to health care, other services, and culturally and

linguistically sensitive information on how to prevent being infected and infecting others, and must consider social determinants such as discrimination and criminalization in their response operations. Refugees and migrants must be involved in the design of readiness and response plans, policies and strategies, and be given the necessary assurances to be able to fully participate in public health measures. “Effective communication to counter misperceptions about the role of refugees and migrants is vital in the COVID-19 pandemic,” said Dr Severoni Dr Santino Severoni, Special Adviser on Health and Migration and Director ad interim of the Division of Health Systems and Public Health at WHO/Europe (WHO, 2020).

Malaysia has taken preventive action through Movement Control Order (MCO) in 18 March 2020 through Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act 1988 and the Police Act 1967. Malaysia used to enforce this law in 2010 to prevent the malaria disease. The main objective of the MCO is to isolate the source of the coronavirus pandemic. The methods of prevention or isolating the source of coronavirus pandemic include prohibition of movement and mass assembly nationwide, including all religious, sports, social and cultural activities; suspension of all religious activities in mosques including Friday prayers; prohibition of leaving the country while restrictions placed on the entry of non-Malaysians into Malaysia; the closure of all premises and buildings except for infrastructure services and supermarkets, wet market, grocery stores and multi-functional stores selling daily necessities; the closure of all nurseries, government and private schools, including boarding schools, international schools, tahfiz centres as well as primary, secondary and pre-university education institutions; as well as public, private universities and vocational training.

Based on the Ministry of Health Malaysia situation report on 31 March 2020, there have been a total of 2,788 cases, with 140 new cases on 31 March 2020, 2,186 cases under treatment and 537 cases have been discharged (MOH, 2020). Sadly, death cases have reached 43. 4 In terms of test or screening on covid-19, the Ministry had conducted screening on 40,483 individuals with 29,498 are negative (means no covid-19), but have been advised to self-isolate from the public. 2,766 cases are confirmed positive under the treatment at various health facilities.

This study aims at analyzing political change during pandemic. It starts with a premise that Covid-19 is not simply a concern for the lockdown, social distance, restoration, or improvement of the health condition under natural environment. It is about attitude, awareness and understanding of a health situation and acceptance order from that government and providing the government with legitimacy of power. It tries to see a bigger picture beyond the details of one's own life. From a movement point of view, government uses the power of state laws to regulate individual social and economic choice to the diminishment of human values and life or a political movement that uses the state as its primary means of action. Health security as any security issues must have a political outcome (Marsh, 2002).

Methodology

Questionnaires

This study used a questionnaire as an instrument for obtaining data. The questionnaire consisted of two sections: Part A: Personal information of respondents. This part contains the personal information that aims to help researchers find and understand the background of research subjects. This section contains seven items intended to obtain information relating to gender, nationality, age, occupation, income, tenure, and ethnicity.

Section B: Understanding of health security issues. This part consists of 10 items to assess aspects of understanding on environmental security issues namely (1) health threat is a serious problem in Malaysia. (2) The health threat is also a global problem (3) Problems such as flood was burdening the community (4) The problem of covid-19 is due to uncontrolled virus (5) Health problems Covid-19 cannot be avoided (6) Problems arise because of human weaknesses itself (7) This problem arises because of a lifestyle such food and beverage taken.

Part C is about trusting the government action in dealing with the problem. (8) The problem arises because there is no cooperation in addressing health issues (9) Problems arise due to the economic development (10) Problems arise because of different beliefs in addressing health issues. All respondents were provided with five options based on the following Likert scale: 1. Strongly Disagree. 2. Disagree. 3. Not Sure. 4. Agree. 5. Strongly Agree

Population and Sample

The study population is of Malaysian students of high education. In order to represent the entire Malaysian students, the study involved only near to a thousand respondents in seeking views on aspects of awareness and political cooperation in addressing health issues. The study involved 950 respondents randomly selected from Malaysian Universities. The samples were made up of all walks of life that represent the population. By disregarding data that cannot be analyzed, then the sample was about 950. Due to Movement Movement Control Order (MCO) or Perintah Kawalan Pergerakan(PKP), this study only focuses in University Kebangsaan Malaysia in a state of Selangor.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from questionnaires were processed using Statistical Packages for The Social Science (SPSS) software. Descriptive statistics were used for percentages and frequencies. Descriptive analysis is a comprehensive technical description of the status of the survey which aims to provide an initial overview of the demographic profile. In analyzing the data, researchers are concerned with the complete answers of the respondents. Thus, incomplete questionnaires would be misleading and will be deducted from the analysis.

Results and Discussion

Awareness of Covid-19 Issues: A total of 57.3 % of respondents felt that the latest information on health security threats such as Covid-19 was well received and meet their expectations. Further, only about 25.2 % are not satisfied and find the latest information on health threats such as Covid-19 is not acceptable, as expected. 16.5 % respondents are very satisfied and felt the information received is exceeding their expectations. Majority of respondents or 94.84 % stated that problems such as flu and cough are burdening themselves and their families. Meanwhile, the rest said it is not a burden. A total of 385 or 50.3 % of respondents said that the best way to manage the health problem of covid-19 is through the restoration of orders. This is because if the order such as social distance clogged, it will cause flash disorder, particularly in urban areas. Therefore, some respondents suggested that the quality of the system can be improved and enhanced. Apart from this, a total of 18.14 % of respondents believe that the way out is to avoid the rampant disease is to tackle the problem of spreading. A total of 10.32 % of respondents suggested that the government should monitor the development of covid-19. This is because development contributed to a variety of symptoms and health crises, such as lack of sanitizer, short of ventilators and hospital bed. . Furthermore, there are 9.14 % of respondents said that awareness campaigns and education

are also able to overcome the problem of contagion as it can enlighten the public about the importance of good health care and stewardship.

This study found that majority of respondents tends to agree that covid-19 problems are due to human rather than ecological factor. While the opinion is almost equally divided on whether the problems is due to ecological factor such as virus, more tend to agree with human factors such as lack of medical awareness, low political cooperation, economic development and difference in believes on how to handle the problem. It was found that a total of 26.2 % or 248 respondents did not agree that Covid-19 cannot be avoided. This is followed by 25.4 % or 241 respondents agreed with this statement. Meanwhile, a total of 17.9 % or 170 respondents said strongly agree. Next, a total of 16 % and 14 % respectively said not sure and was not successful. Therefore, opinion on whether Covid-19 is avoidable is almost equally divided into two. It is obvious that majority of respondents agreed that Covid-19 is due to human factor. The data shows that 59.7 % or 566 respondents strongly agree that the problem arises because the man himself. This is followed by 32.6 % of respondents agreed with this statement. Meanwhile, a total of 4.5 % or 43 respondents said that not sure. Next, a total of 1.3 % and 1.5 % respectively disagree and strongly disagree.

On a statement that Covid-19 is due to lifestyle, more respondent tend not to agree. A total of 186 (19.6 %) of respondents strongly not agree with this statement. 209 (22.0 %) respondents said not agree. Meanwhile, 19 % or 180 respondents said that they are agree and 177 respondents (18.6 %) said strongly agree. Next, a total of 22 % and 12.3 % respectively saying do not agree and strongly agree. While, large number of respondents, 26.6 % or 252 respondents did not sure with the fact that these problems arise because of food and beverage.

With regard to government actions to address Covid-19 problems, it was found that a total of 37.7 % or 357 respondents agreed with the statement that the problem mitigated because there is political cooperation in addressing health issues. This was followed by a total of 30.6 of the respondents strongly agree with this statement. Meanwhile, a total of 23 % or 218 respondents said that not sure. Next, a total of 6.5 % and 1.7 % respectively disagree and say was not successful.

In addition, a total of 41.8 % or 396 respondents that problems arise because the problem arises of economic development. This was followed by a total of 37.4 % or 355 respondents strongly agree with this statement. Meanwhile, a total of 11.5 % or 109 respondents said that not sure. Next, a total of 6.8 % and 2 % respectively saying do not agree and strongly agree

Finally, it was also noted that a total of 37 % or 351 respondents agreed with the statement that the problem arises because different understanding and belief in dealing with health issues. This was followed by a total of 24.5 % of respondents strongly agree with this statement. Meanwhile, a total of 24.2 % or 229 respondents said not sure. Next, a total of 9.5 % and 4.2 % respectively saying do not agree and very strongly agree.

Based on the result of this study, it can be summarised that human factor is equally or probably more dominant in determining Covid-19 problems. Despite health based disasters such as SARS, MERS and COVID-19 towards health problems is more important in order to determine whether the notion of Covid-19 is more prone to crisis or not. Thus, rather than looking at the causal linkage between health problems and crisis, analysts are primarily

concerned with the health problems themselves. Virus rise, social distancing and other predicted consequences of Covid-19 are considered threats. The sources of these threats are multidimensional and existential. They are indiscrete, long-term and very difficult to combat. They are difficult to combat because they have economic, political and social implication (WHO, 2020).

It is important to note that awareness on Covid-19 problem such as social and political change is now worldwide. This change has global effects and it can only be tackled effectively through national and international agreement. Other issues have more local effects in the first instance and they can be dealt with at the national level. However, because of their cumulative impact around the world, they also require international action. Action is certainly required where international trade shifts impacts around the world (He, 2020; Darwish et al., 2018).

This research on political change and Covid-19, while limited to how the respondents aware and understand the issue, has brought attention to the growing salience of non-conventional security threats. It has also stimulated discussion on issues of health and human security. It appears that this latter discussion may provide a useful framework within which to address development issues.

Conclusion

COVID-19 is a new disease that brings overwhelmingly unprecedented situations. Unlike the previous pandemic and epidemic, they were under control. The unprecedented situation requires for unprecedented measures to deal with the situation. Malaysia has taken necessary action to prevent the pandemic for the safety of the people.

The analysis shows that the respondents are knowledgeable and aware of the health security issues. Most of them are aware of the threat of Covid-19 as well as its political consequences. In addition, the knowledge on health security has more influence by the idea that it is human nurture rather than nature as the main cause of the problem. Their understanding only reflects the idea of health security as preservation of environment.

In sum, Malaysians are aware of the health problems, with more actions and improvements could be taken to secure the health and government effectively. Knowledge and awareness and the importance to preserve the health condition will lead to movements and reactions. Muhyiddin's government will still be supported as long as the public is aware of the issue and they continue to obey the government. It is important for future analyses to examine more on the issue of awareness based on health security issues.

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Limitation

The sample from university students cannot be taken as generalization of overall Malaysian public. In this pandemic due to restrictions, we can only manage the student. However, as the nature of university students as they were kept in the campus parameter, their perceptions are due to their actions and limitations.

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