

Malaysia's Success Story in Curbing the COVID-19 Pandemic

by Andrea Passeri

As the world witnesses a watershed era marked by a progressive power shift from West to East, the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has further signalled that the age of Western hegemony is coming to an end, to be replaced by the advent of the "Asian century".

In such perspective, even a sneak peek at the data provided by the World Health Organisation highlights an irrefutable truth: East Asian countries have largely outperformed their European and North American counterparts when it comes to handling the pandemic. This is true both in terms of the formulation of more effective policy responses to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus, and in the attainment of a far higher degree of social compliance with the restrictive measures and standard operating procedures (SOPs) imposed to mitigate this unprecedented health crisis.

As of mid-September, with the notable exception of the Philippines that sits at the 21st place worldwide for total confirmed cases, no other East Asian nation features in the list of the 25 most affected countries, whereas the European and American continents hold eight spots in the top ten.¹ Southeast Asia, in particular, has recorded 562,807 infections thus far (1.9 per cent of the global toll), which stand in stark contrast with the overall number of cases suffered in the Americas (14,815,178) and Europe (4,840,830).

Such a startling discrepancy acquires an even greater magnitude by looking at COVID-19's mortality rate, oscillating above 10 per cent in Italy, Belgium and the UK, compared with countries like Vietnam (3.29 per cent), Thailand (1.68 per cent) and Malaysia (1.29 per cent)

¹ For the updated figures provided by the World Health Organisation on the global spread of COVID-19, see: *WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard*, <https://covid19.who.int>.

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that managed to keep the death toll at bay.

Malaysia, in particular, has attracted domestic and international praise thanks to its successful attempts to break the chain of infections, stemming from a timely and multifaceted strategy that was adopted from the very start of the crisis. As a result, Malaysia recorded a relatively low number of cases (9,946) and deaths (287), while also achieving a recovery rate (93.1 per cent) that appears significantly higher than the global average (72.4 per cent).

In a nutshell, Putrajaya's anti-COVID blueprint has revolved around three pivotal tenets, encompassing the enhancement of screening capabilities and hospitalisation capacity in the public health sector; the adoption of contact tracing technologies aimed at bringing disease clusters under control; as well as the launch of an effective communication strategy to present new SOPs and win the support of the population.

The first pillar of this strategy was pursued since the early stages of Malaysia's fight against coronavirus: accordingly, between December 2019 and April 2020 the number of hospitals equipped for COVID-19 patients surged from 26 to 40; whilst screening centres and ventilator units recorded, respectively, a nation-wide increase of 53 per cent (from 56 to 120) and 49 per cent (from 526 to 1,034).²

² Fifi Rahman, "The Malaysian Response to COVID-19: Building Preparedness for Surge Capacity, Testing Efficiency and Containment", in *European Pharmaceutical Review*, 4 August 2020, <https://www.europeanpharmaceuticalreview.com/article/125084/the-malaysian-response-to-covid-19-building-preparedness-for-surge-capacity-testing-efficiency-and-containment>.

These efforts, in turn, have allowed Malaysian authorities to step-up the capacity of testing on a daily basis, which jumped from 3,500 per day in early February to a peak of 20,635 per day at the start of May. In parallel, the aforementioned rise in inpatient and intensive care unit beds availability has paved the way for the implementation of one of the most peculiar corollaries of Malaysia's strategy, namely the hospitalisation of those who are asymptomatic or show only mild symptoms.

The active detection of positive patients, moreover, has mostly relied on the adoption of contact tracing tools, thanks also to the previous expertise developed by Putrajaya in the eradication of other infectious diseases such as dengue and tuberculosis. In this regard, the cornerstone of the government's efforts to isolate COVID-19 clusters was embodied by the introduction in mid-April of the Gerak Malaysia, MySejahtera and MySejahtera Check In smartphone apps, which utilise the same GPS and QR code technologies employed in Singapore and South Korea to track infection chains.

Most notably, the launch of contact tracing apps has been accompanied by a high degree of public compliance: Gerak Malaysia, for example, has totalled 1.3 million downloads in less than two days since its release, even though it has also raised some eyebrows amongst local commentators for all the risks in terms of privacy protection

[com/article/125084/the-malaysian-response-to-covid-19-building-preparedness-for-surge-capacity-testing-efficiency-and-containment](https://www.europeanpharmaceuticalreview.com/article/125084/the-malaysian-response-to-covid-19-building-preparedness-for-surge-capacity-testing-efficiency-and-containment).

subsumed in the use of similar tools.³

The third centrepiece of Putrajaya's strategy to fight coronavirus has relied, instead, on the adoption of a multifaceted communication campaign aimed at delivering timely updates regarding the progression of the pandemic, as well as accessible information on the restrictive measures put in place by the government.

Against this backdrop, state agencies have made full use of conventional and digital media to present the three stages of Malaysia's lockdown, namely the "movement control order" (MCO) imposed from 18 March to 4 May, the "conditional MCO" established from 4 May until 9 June, and the "recovery MCO" that is expected to expire at the end of the year. Progression across the various phases of the quarantine has been accompanied by a gradual and prudent relaxation of its regulations, which have been strictly enforced with more than 19,500 arrests during the first month of lockdown.

The overwhelming majority of the Malaysian population, however, displayed a high degree of compliance with the rules and limitations introduced by public authorities. In this regard, many commentators have praised the communication strategy put in place by the two official spokespersons for all matters related to the government response against the

pandemic, namely the Health Director General, Noor Hisham Abdullah, and the Minister of Defence, Ismail Sabri Yaakob.

Since late February, their daily press briefings devoted, respectively, to the health and non-health issues entailed in the anti-COVID campaign have glued millions of Malaysians to their TVs, winning a widespread popular support through the employment of a competent, reassuring, and familiar tone. By the same token, public agencies have endeavoured to reach a wider audience and contrast the spread of fake news through the use of social media, SMS, advertisements and the aforementioned apps.

Hence, if public compliance with the MCO and social distancing rules has further propelled Malaysia at the very apex of regional indexes, part of the credit goes to a communication campaign that has been pursued in a timely and coherent manner, in line with Putrajaya's "whole-of-government and whole-of-society" approach.

This collectivist orientation, that resonates with East Asia's Confucian tradition based on the prominence of social duties over individual necessities, has thus contributed in persuading some 95 per cent of the Malaysian population to comply since the very beginning of the lockdown with the stay-at-home order, as highlighted by the data provided by the Kuala Lumpur-based polling group Merdeka Center.⁴

⁴ Ralph Jennings, "How Cultural Differences Help Asian Countries Beat COVID-19, While US Struggles", in *VOA News*, 22 July 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/how->

³ Justin Zack, "Police: Gerak Malaysia App Downloaded Over 1.3 Million Times So Far", in *The Star*, 5 May 2020, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/05/05/police-gerak-malaysia-app-downloaded-over-13-million-times-so-far>.

Last but not least, the coalition government led by Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin has also dedicated significant efforts to promote regional initiatives aimed at containing the social and economic impact of the pandemic. Accordingly, during the ASEAN special summit held in mid-April via videoconference, Malaysia championed the idea of a special recovery plan designed to support economic cooperation amongst its member states and to strengthen the connectivity of supply chains, through the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Reserve of Medical Supplies for Public Health Emergencies (RRMS) and the ASEAN Response Fund, which was official launched at the 36th ASEAN summit held in June.

Thanks to his positive job in managing the unprecedented challenge brought about by the novel coronavirus, Muhyiddin has benefitted from a progressive increase in his approval rating, especially amongst Malays and Indians. The Prime Minister, who took office at the start of March after defecting from the multi-party, multi-ethnic coalition Pakatan Harapan, may therefore consider calling a snap election to consolidate his narrow majority in the Malaysian parliament, which is also expected to vote in the near future on the no-confidence motion against the government filed by Muhyiddin's predecessor Mohamad Mahathir.

By the same token, the pandemic has also had reverberating effects on

[cultural-differences-help-asian-countries-beat-covid-19-while-us-struggles](#).

Malaysia's international positioning and foreign policy trajectory, especially in the framework of the recent escalation of tensions between China and the US. According to Malaysian scholar Kuik Cheng-Chwee, Putrajaya's diplomatic blueprint in an increasingly uncertain, post-pandemic regional scenario will likely accentuate its deep-rooted rationale based on the concept of hedging, so as to avoid taking sides in the ongoing clash between Washington and Beijing.⁵ In line with such approach, Malaysia is thus expected to double down on its diversification efforts aimed at consolidating multidimensional partnerships with an expanding range of international interlocutors, which are seen as a crucial antidote against the growing polarisation of regional politics.

Nonetheless, the visible difference displayed by East Asian and European countries in tailoring a timely and effective response to the epochal challenge posed by the novel coronavirus can also pave the way for cross-country learning. In such regard, the lessons learnt from the management of the first wave of the pandemic encompass the use of big data to track the emergence of new clusters, the implementation of mass testing campaigns and stricter border control measures, which in the European case have been put in place in a much more hesitant fashion compared to East Asia.

⁵ Kuik Cheng-Chwee, "Hedging in Post-Pandemic Asia: What, How, and Why?", in *The Asan Forum*, 6 June 2020, <http://www.theasanforum.org/?p=9920>.

Against this backdrop, and in order to facilitate the sharing of best practices and foster stronger coordination in tackling the virus, the Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM) has recently allocated 15.9 billion euro for the COVID-19 Global Response Fund,⁶ while also making provisions for the exchange of experts and the introduction of joint training programmes, a first important step to improve the cross-fertilisation of ideas and expertise between Europe and Asia in the development of preventive measures to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic.

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⁶ European External Action Service (EEAS), *Coronavirus: Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Statement*, 7 September 2020, <https://europa.eu/!VJ94GT>.

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