

## Our Brain Needs A Breather

By Michelle Low

Resilience built on a *#sayajagasaya* (I take care of myself) mentality, fear, stress, and anxiety has left Malaysians stuck on a roller coaster ride of the Movement Control Order (MCOs), Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCOs), and Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCOs) with no clear end in sight. It has been almost 16 months since the first case of COVID-19 was detected in Malaysia – January 25, 2020 and 14 months since the implementation of the country's first MCO – March 18, 2020. In the early weeks and months of the pandemic, Malaysia was applauded for the government's efforts and the nation's compliance to its leadership in breaking the infection chain of the deadly virus. Moreover, in mid-April 2020, the China Global TV Network (CGTN) named Malaysia's Health Director-General Tan Sri Datuk Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah as one of the top doctors in the world for his approach in managing the pandemic. However, the global recognition of Malaysia's efforts was an over-optimistic reaction.

Following the elections in Sabah in September 2020, the relaxation of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) throughout the year-end school holidays and New Year celebration, and the arrival of different mutations of the virus, Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin implemented MCO 2.0 in five states and a federal territory on January 13, 2021. This MCO was later extended to the rest of the country, with the exception of Sarawak until mid-February 2021. Nevertheless, the government's nuclear 'all-or-nothing' tactic seem futile as within three months of MCO 2.0, Malaysia, with the exception of Sarawak, is back under MCO for the third time.

Despite continuous backlash from fellow Malaysians and political opposition about the manner in which the government had executed the different variations of MCO, the Perikatan Nasional (PN) government has been slow to change its management of the pandemic. Consequently, the pandemic jeopardised the jobs of many, especially those from the B40 and M40 groups, who have either lost their source of income or are on the verge of losing their rice bowl. In April 2020, Malaysia witnessed the highest spike in its unemployment rate since 1990 – 5.0% – and although the unemployment rate has decreased by 0.2% to 4.8% in February 2021, it remains uncertain how MCO 3.0 will affect the unemployment rate. Whilst most businesses are allowed to operate during MCO 3.0, the introduction of the Hotspot Identification for Dynamic Engagement (HIDE) system and the devastating increase in COVID-19 cases have left Malaysians unsure of the durability of their existing rice bowls. Hence, this economic uncertainty has disrupted the mental health of many Malaysians.

Besides that, organisations such as the Women's Aid Organisation (WAO), Talian Kasih, and the All Women's Action Society (AWAM) reported an increase in domestic abuse and violence-related calls during MCO 1.0 and MCO 2.0. Therefore, it is unsurprising that these organisations have continuously voiced their concerns about the psychological impact of such lockdown as survivors of domestic abuse and violence are forced into isolation with their abusers with no way out and no contact with their family or social support networks. Hence, the more frequent the government implements MCOs, the harder it will be to reverse and remedy the growing toxic environment within Malaysian households. Those with pre-existing mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety will also struggle to manage their mental health owing to the physical isolation enforced during MCOs and the uncertainty in Malaysia's ability to defend itself against the escalation of coronavirus within its borders.

Additionally, those who suffer from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) – a disorder which sees many of its sufferers compulsively washing their hands, will have to wrestle with their inability to distinguish whether their frequent and repeated hand washing is an act of compulsion or an act of safety against coronavirus. Evidently, if Malaysia fails to effectively control the virus from spiralling out of control as it has in India, Malaysia will face a more invisible pandemic – the vulnerable status of Malaysians' mental health.

As a matter of fact, fear is necessary for survival. When our brain identifies an event as a threat, our sympathetic nervous system goes into overdrive to prepare our bodies for a fight. Once the threat has been eliminated, our parasympathetic nervous system steps in to return our brain and bodies to a state of calmness. However, prolonged exposure to a threat with no possible way out will leave our bodies and brain in a constant state of restlessness. In this constant state of restlessness, our brain will strive to fight or flight the threat. However, when neither solution is feasible, the extended state of stress, anxiety, and fear will eventually inhibit our ability to survive.

In the last 16 months, Malaysians have been in a chronic state of high stress, anxiety, and fear resulting in a growing anger and distrust for politicians. Why are Malaysians angry? Do they still trust the government? Can politicians regain the trust of Malaysians and effectively ensure that the mental health of Malaysians does not slip further?

### **Malaysia's Double Standard SOPs: *Rakyat* vs VIPs**

From day one of the pandemic, we have been constantly reminded of the 3Ws and 3Cs – Wash (our hands), Wear (a mask), and Warn (ourselves and others to practice good hygiene and physical distancing) and avoid Crowded places, Close-contact settings, and Confined and enclosed spaces. It is also a known fact that if we have travelled to another country or are categorised as a close contact or person under investigation, we are expected to quarantine at home or at a designated quarantine centre for 10 to 14 days.

Furthermore, the Emergency (Prevention and Control of Infectious Disease) (Amendment) Ordinance 2021 clearly stated that if anyone is caught violating the 3Ws, 3Cs, and other SOPs stipulated to prevent and control the spread of coronavirus, they will be fined RM10,000 for each violation. It is evident that the law enforcement officials are serious about penalising those who have violated the SOPs as many hawkers have been fined RM10,000 for not observing the rules and an employee of an eatery was recently caught by the police for 'dining in' in the restaurant he works at, before his shift.

On the other hand, VIPs such as Federal Territories Minister Tan Sri Annuar Musa, Deputy Federal Territories Minister Datuk Seri Edmund Santhara Kumar, Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Zuraida Kamaruddin, and actress Noor Neelofa Mohd Noor have allegedly violated the COVID-19 SOPs, yet it was not the law enforcement officials but netizens who highlighted their alleged transgressions. These double standard practices have left the *rakyat* increasingly furious with and somewhat distrustful of the government. This frustration with those whose job is to prioritise the security and safety of the *rakyat* has further affected the already vulnerable state of Malaysian mental health.

### **MCO: Movement Control Order or Making Confusing Orders?**

After 14 months of MCO, CMCO, and RMCO, the *rakyat* remained confused about the do's and don'ts associated with each phase of lockdown. For instance, when MCO 1.0 was implemented in March

2020, all economic sectors except for essential services were required to shut down or move their operations online. However, the government has permitted most non-essential services such as malls to remain open during MCO 2.0 and MCO 3.0. Besides that, when the State government in Selangor banned the operation of bazaars including Ramadan bazaars during MCO 3.0 yet Ramadan bazaars were allowed to continue operating in Kuala Lumpur despite the Federal Territory, which is administered by the Federal Government, also being under MCO 3.0. This confusion has seen many business owners and individuals unnecessarily penalised for the political failure to roll out standardised SOPs for each phase of lockdown, nationwide.

In a recent joint press conference with Health Director-General, Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah, Senior Minister for Defence Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob shared that the government will introduce standardised SOPs for MCO, CMCO, and RMC0 which will be uniformly implemented across Malaysia. He added that the SOPs will be adapted to the changing COVID-19 situation in Malaysia but provided no further details. Despite this announcement, the apparent non-standardisation of SOPs has resulted in an accumulation of 474,556 COVID-19 positive cases, as of May 18, 2021. Ismail Sabri stressed that any perceived delay in the announcement and implementation of an SOP was because each proposal must be approved by different ministries and the Ministry of Health must give its seal of approval before it is announced to the public. Also, the government had implied that the increase in cases was due to the growing pandemic fatigue experienced by the *rakyat*, just when they need to be more vigilant and proactive in staying home even if the SOPs were relaxed.

The *rakyat* griped about the sudden implementation of the HIDE system which left many business owners – big, medium, and small – at a financial loss when the government abruptly announced that all premises on the HIDE list were required to close for three days. Designed to provide and empower the *rakyat* to make informed decisions on whether they want to visit premises which have the potential of becoming hotspots for COVID-19 clusters to emerge, the HIDE system is useful as it can help modulate the behaviour of the *rakyat*. However, the *ad hoc* announcement that all premises were required to close for three days raised questions as to what will happen to premises which appear more than once on the HIDE list – are they expected to close indefinitely?

### **What can Malaysia learn from the rest of the world?**

If Malaysia wants to safeguard its *rakyat* from another year-long exposure to stress, anxiety, and fear, Malaysia must learn from the success and failures of the other countries.

#### ***The global pariah to a role model: Italy***

At the outset of the pandemic, Italy was the epicenter of COVID-19. However, within a few months, the country was in total control of the virus and transformed itself into a model for the rest of the world. Although Italy has not been successful at eliminating the virus from within its borders, its weekly X-ray of the country's health by local health officials, hospitals, and doctors has allowed the National Institute of Health to execute suitable and effective policies. Besides that, the Parliament's decision to declare a state of emergency meant that the government had the power to introduce and maintain stringent restrictions including movement restrictions between regions, towns, and streets. While the Italian government's extreme measures received internal and external criticisms, the outcome spoke volumes. Italy had successfully denounced its global pariah status by prioritising the lives of its *rakyat* before politics and economy.

### ***Are you positive or negative: Test, track, and trace in South Korea and Taiwan?***

From the very beginning of the outbreak, the South Korean and Taiwanese governments made it copiously clear that testing is the cornerstone for controlling the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, in May 2020, Taiwan lowered its restriction on testing to include the general public who wanted to do the COVID-19 swab test for either emergency reasons, work, study or travel purposes. On the other hand, South Korea – which was greatly affected by the MERS outbreak in 2015 – immediately adopted a nationwide ‘testing, tracing, treating’ model even before the country recorded its first positive COVID-19 case. In doing so, Taiwan and South Korea have been relatively successful at ensuring that the virus does not spiral out-of-control even as their Asian neighbours continue to struggle.

### ***Eradication, not containment: New Zealand***

New Zealand’s Prime Minister Jacinda Arden made it abundantly clear from the onset of the pandemic that New Zealand’s goal was not to contain the spread of the virus but to eradicate it from the country. Hence, the Arden administration’s closure of its borders, compulsory quarantine for all returnees, and a coronavirus response alert plan which included full lockdown, eradicated the virus from within its borders. As such, New Zealand is today, one of the most successful, if not the most successful country to have contained and eradicated the coronavirus.

### ***A Well-Informed Rakyat is a ‘Negative’ Rakyat***

It is an unfortunate reality that Malaysia did not have an effective crisis communication plan since the first case of COVID-19 case was detected in the country, 16 months ago. Throughout this period, the *rakyat* have been repeatedly told to mind the 3Ws and 3Cs but the confusing SOPs, the *ad hoc* announcement and unsystematic implementation of lockdowns across the country, and the never-ending finger-pointing by politicians, had left Malaysians exposed to prolonged state of stress, and anxiety. It is no wonder the lockdown fatigue has caused the pandemic to surge in 2021 in tandem with growing frustration over the government’s lack of political will to effectively contain coronavirus within Malaysia, let alone eradicate it.

Hence, for the safety, security, and sanity of all Malaysians, the government should work towards an approach which will empower its *rakyat* to be well-informed. As we are in the midst of a third MCO, the government should take cognizance of the British government’s roadmap out of lockdown. In his roadmap, Prime Minister Boris Johnson informed Britons that each phase of the roadmap has a tentative date. However, the date may be subject to change based on the number of active cases, progress of the nation’s vaccination programme, and containment of any new variants within the country. The SOPs for each phase of the roadmap out of lockdown was clear and concise.

Malaysia’s National Covid-19 Immunisation Programme might want to consider introducing an interactive heat-map function to the HIDE system. The interactive heat-map can be adapted from algorithms of interactive political risk, terrorism and/or political violence risk maps where localities in Malaysia may be designated red, yellow or green colours based on the probability that these locales may develop into hotspot for COVID-19 clusters. By introducing the interactive heat-map function, the *rakyat* will be informed why a specific premise or area is included in the HIDE list and from there, make an informed decision on whether they want to visit the listed premise or area. Moreover, the interactive heat-map will also provide business owners more time to prepare the necessary logistics for any potential closure of premises, for sanitation purposes.

Lastly, as Malaysia rolls out its vaccines, the National Covid-19 Immunisation Programme and the Ministry of Health must succinctly communicate the viability and risks of each vaccine for the different groups of *rakyat* in a timely manner. This is to ensure that an infodemic about the vaccines does not deter the *rakyat* from being vaccinated.

## **Conclusion**

Truthfully, Malaysians have a long road ahead of them. Therefore, the creation and implementation of a clear, concise, and standardised roadmap out of MCO 3.0 is necessary. The introduction of the roadmap must include mass ‘test, track, and trace’, be thoroughly equipped with an effective crisis communication apparatus wherein the government provides frequent updates on the progress of the nation’s healthcare system and be unafraid to be honest and vulnerable about the state of the pandemic in Malaysia. Moreover, the government and law enforcement officials must be accountable and ensure that everyone – *rakyat* and VIPs – are given the same treatment and penalties.

Although it remains unclear how the pandemic will unfold in Malaysia and the rest of the world, if the government chooses to grant our brain a breather through delivering some opiate sense of certainty and standardised routine, Malaysians may be able to rebuild their resilience on the foundation of *#kitajagakita*, trust, and open communication.