

Pandemic, Politics, and a Fairer Society in Southeast Asia

DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES ON CREATING A FAIRER SOCIETY

A fair society is one that is just, inclusive and embracing of all without any barriers to participation based on sex, sexual orientation, religion or belief, ethnicity, age, class, ability or any other social difference. One where there is access to healthcare and education, technology, justice, strong institutions, peace and security, social protection, decent work and housing. But how can research truly contribute to creating global equity and diversity without showcasing diverse voices that are underrepresented in academia or paying specific attention to the Global South?

Including books addressing key challenges and issues within the social sciences which are essential to creating a fairer society for all with specific reference to the Global South, *Diverse Perspectives on Creating a Fairer Society* amplifies underrepresented voices – showcasing Black, Asian and minority ethnic voices, authorship from the Global South, and academics who work to amplify diverse voices.

With the primary aim of showcasing authorship and voices from beyond the Global North, the series welcomes submissions from established and junior authors on cutting-edge and high-level research on key topics that feature in global news and public debate, specifically from and about the Global South in national and international contexts. Harnessing research across a range of diversities of people and place to generate previously unheard insights, the series offers a truly global perspective on the current societal debates of the twenty-first century – bringing contemporary debate in the social sciences from diverse voices to light.

Previous Titles

Disaster, Displacement and Resilient Livelihoods: Perspectives from South Asia
edited by M. Rezaul Islam

*Empowering Female Climate Change Activists in the Global South: The Path
Toward Environmental Social Justice* by Peggy Ann Spitzer

Forthcoming Titles

Gendered Perspectives of Restorative Justice, Violence and Resilience: An International Framework edited by Bev Orton

Youth Development in South Africa: Harnessing the Demographic Dividend edited
by Botshabelo Maja and Busani Ngcaweni

Social Sector Development and Inclusive Growth in India by Ishu Chadda
*Critical Reflections on the Internationalisation of Higher Education in the Global
South* edited by Emnet Tadesse Woldegiorgis and Cheryl Qiumei Yu

Pandemic, Politics, and a Fairer Society in Southeast Asia: A Malaysian Perspective

EDITED BY

SYAZA SHUKRI

International Islamic University, Malaysia



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2023

Editorial matter and selection © 2023 Syaza Shukri.
Individual chapters © 2023 The authors.
Published under exclusive licence by Emerald Publishing Limited.

Reprints and permissions service

Contact: permissions@emeraldinsight.com

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without either the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying issued in the UK by The Copyright Licensing Agency and in the USA by The Copyright Clearance Center. Any opinions expressed in the chapters are those of the authors. Whilst Emerald makes every effort to ensure the quality and accuracy of its content, Emerald makes no representation implied or otherwise, as to the chapters' suitability and application and disclaims any warranties, express or implied, to their use.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80455-589-7 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-80455-588-0 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-80455-590-3 (Epub)



ISOQAR
REGISTERED

Certificate Number 1985
ISO 14001

ISOQAR certified
Management System,
awarded to Emerald
for adherence to
Environmental
standard
ISO 14001:2004.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*In loving memory of Ishtiaq Hossain
Beyond a gifted International Relations expert
He graciously shone the light on the next generation of scholars*

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

List of Tables	ix
About the Contributors	xi
Chapter 1 Introduction: Pandemic and Public Trust <i>Syaza Shukri</i>	1
Part I: Trends in Southeast Asia	
Introduction to Part I	17
Chapter 2 Public Trust and Democracy: Human Rights During the Pandemic in Southeast Asia <i>James Gomez and Robin Ramcharan</i>	21
Chapter 3 Populist Leaders in the Philippines and Malaysia <i>Abdul Kabir A. Gonzales</i>	39
Chapter 4 Civil–Military Relations and the Securitisation of the COVID-19 Crisis in the Philippines and Malaysia <i>John Lee Candelaria and Fernan Talamayan</i>	53
Chapter 5 The Role of Indonesian Religious Institutions in Empowering Society During the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Human Security Perspective <i>Suyani Indriastuti and Bagus Sigit Sunarko</i>	67
Chapter 6 Pandemic Era and Public Trust in Southeast Asia: The End or Triumph of (Post-)Modernism? <i>Zahid Zamri</i>	81

Part II: Public Perception and Election in Malaysia

Introduction to Part II	93
Chapter 7 Public Opinion Polls in Malaysia: Challenges and Opportunities in The Post-pandemic Era <i>Tunku Mohar Mokhtar</i>	97
Chapter 8 Public Perception of Malaysian Government Management During the First Wave of COVID-19 Outbreak <i>Rabiah Aminudin, Lee Pei May, Norhaslinda Jamaudin, Rohana Abdul Hamid and Syaza Shukri</i>	113
Chapter 9 The 2021 Malacca State Election: A Turning Point from the 2018 General Election <i>Z. W. Lau</i>	137

Part III: Government Policies During COVID-19

Introduction to Part III	153
Chapter 10 Child Poverty in Malaysia: Issues and Challenges <i>Norhaslinda Jamaudin</i>	157
Chapter 11 Analysis of Government's Policies on Gender Issues During Covid-19 <i>Rabiah Aminudin</i>	177
Chapter 12 Competition for Global Influence Post-pandemic: China's Vaccine Diplomacy in Malaysia <i>Lee Pei May</i>	191
Chapter 13 Conclusion: Post-pandemic and Future Research on Sustainability <i>Syaza Shukri and Rabiah Aminudin</i>	207
Index	213

List of Tables

Table 1.1	Measures Taken by the Malaysian Government from March 2020	3
Table 2.1	Per cent of Trust in Government of the Global and Countries in SEA	24
Table 8.1	Reliability Analysis for the Three Constructs	119
Table 8.2	Socio-demographic Characteristics of Respondents in the Study	120
Table 8.3	Respondent Perception of the Government’s Public Health Responses in Managing the COVID-19 Pandemic	122
Table 8.4	Respondent Perception of the Government’s Economic Responses in Managing the COVID-19 Pandemic	124
Table 8.5	Respondent Perception of the Government’s Responses Through Social Regulation in Managing the COVID-19 Pandemic	128
Table 9.1	Number of Seats Won by Political Coalitions for 2008, 2013, and 2018 General Elections for Malacca State Assembly	140
Table 9.2	Seats with Majority Votes Less Than 1,000 Votes in 2008, 2013, and 2018 General Elections for Malacca State Assembly	142
Table 9.3	Number of Seats Differentiated by Majority Votes Won by the Political Coalition for the 2021 Malacca State Election	144
Table 9.4	Seats Won by PH and the Ethnic Composition	145
Table 9.5	Seats Lost by DAP and the Ethnic Composition	145
Table 9.6	Seats Won by PN and the Ethnic Composition	146
Table 9.7	Seats Won by MCA and the Ethnic Composition	146
Table 10.1	Poverty-related Policies as Outlined in the 10th, 11th, and 12th Malaysian Plans	165
Table 10.2	Annual Budget Allocation to Support Children’s Well-being, 2010–2022	167
Table 11.1	Figures of Female Descriptive Representation in Ministerial Positions	182
Table 12.1	Vaccines Donated by the USA to the Southeast Asia Region	197

This page intentionally left blank

About the Contributors

Rohana Abdul Hamid is interested in looking at how the internet affects politics. Her research interests are in online political activism and the use of social media by political parties and candidates in election/political campaigns.

Rabiah Aminudin is a former Head of the Department of Political Science, Abdul-Hamid AbuSulayman Kuliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia. She was a recipient of the Monbukagusho scholarship by the Japanese government for her Master's degree in International Relations. Her PhD in Politics was awarded by the University of Manchester, United Kingdom. She is also an alumna of the exchange programme on Study of the US Institute (SUSI) on US national security sponsored by the State Department of the United States of America. Her research areas focus on identity politics, especially gender, in political institutions and policy processes.

John Lee Candelaria is an assistant professor at the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Hiroshima University. He obtained his PhD from the same university in 2022, with a dissertation on war memories and nation-building in Southeast Asia. His research interests include the Philippines and Southeast Asia, the heritage and memory of crises such as wars, disasters and pandemics and peace studies.

James Gomez is Regional Director at the Asia Centre. He oversees its evidence-based research on issues affecting the Southeast Asian region. He led the Centre's research team that drafted the baseline studies, *COVID-19 and Democracy in Southeast Asia: Building Resilience, Fighting Authoritarianism* (Asia Centre, 2020) and *Securitisation of COVID-19 Health Protocols: Policing the Vulnerable, Infringing Their Rights* (Asia Centre, 2021). He holds a PhD in Political Communication from Monash University, Australia and brings to Asia Centre over 25 years of international and regional experiences in leadership roles at universities, think-tanks, inter-governmental agencies and non-governmental organisations.

Abdul Kabir A. Gonzales is an Educator, Speaker, Analyst, Author, and Human Rights Advocate with extensive leadership and community service experience. He graduated with First-Class Honours in Political Science (Rector's List Awardee) at the International Islamic University of Malaysia and is a recipient of a fully

funded scholarship from Al-Muntada Al-Islami for both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. He has topped (2nd) in Islamic Studies Course at Almaarif Educational Center Inc. and has completed certificate courses in Islamic Economics and Fiqh & Usul Al-Fiqh from IIIT and IIUM. He has published numerous academic essays, articles, analyses, and insights Online. His research interests are international relations, Islam and politics, federalism, public policy, populism, human rights, SDGs and international law.

Suyani Indriastuti is an Assistant Professor in the Department of International Relations, University of Jember Indonesia. She obtained her PhD degree from the University of Nottingham, United Kingdom, in 2019. Her research interests are on the issue of human security, international political economy and resource politics. She was granted funding from the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology for conducting research on the topic of human security. Her recent publications are as follows: ‘Health Versus Economic Security: An Ambivalence of Anti-tobacco Norms Internalization in Indonesia’ (2022) and ‘Comparing Mining Industries and Palm Oil Plantation Impacts on the Human Security of Local Communities’ (2022). In addition to the articles, she wrote a book on human security published by an Indonesian publisher.

Norhaslinda Jamaiudin is an Assistant Professor in Political Science at the IIUM. She earned her BA and MA in Political Science from the IIUM and PhD in Public Administration from University of Science, Malaysia. Her specialisation includes public governance and public sector management, public sector reforms, public policy analysis and personnel management in the Malaysian Civil Service.

Z. W. Lau is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science, International Islamic University Malaysia. He is interested in Malaysian politics, Malaysian Chinese studies, electoral studies and party system. Apart from being a columnist, he used to engage with local and foreign media institutions for his opinion and commentaries.

Tunku Mohar Mokhtar is an Assistant Professor at Department of Political Science, International Islamic University Malaysia.

Lee Pei May is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at the International Islamic University Malaysia. She is interested in the development of the Global South and the idea of catch-up.

Robin Ramcharan is the Executive Director at Asia Centre and a Professor of International Relations at Mahidol University, Thailand. He has worked in the development sector for many years in an international organisation, implementing capacity-building programmes and undertaking training of human resources for the benefit of developing countries. He has taught and researched international law, human rights and democracy and intellectual property rights. He holds a PhD and an MA (DES) in International Relations from the Graduate

Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. He also holds an MA from the London School of Economics and Political Science, an LLM and an LLB from the University of London.

Syaza Shukri is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). She has degrees from the University of Pittsburgh, the London School of Economics and Political Science and IIUM. She has published in numerous journals on topics relating to political Islam, Islamophobia, populism and Malaysian politics.

Bagus Sigit Sunarko is an Assistant Professor in the Department of International Relations, University of Jember Indonesia. He obtained his PhD degree from the Universiti Utara Malaysia. His research interests are human security, international development and international regimes. His recent publication is 'Health Versus Economic Security: An Ambivalence of Anti-tobacco Norms Internalization in Indonesia' (2022).

Fernan Talamayan obtained his PhD from the Institute of Social Research and Cultural Studies, National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University in 2022. He conducts research on populism, propaganda, disinformation and social memory.

Zahid Zamri is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science, AbdulHamid AbuSulayman Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia. He teaches Political Philosophy and Ethics and Politics. He is also the Coordinator of Islamisation of Human Knowledge for the Kulliyah and a Research Fellow at the Global Centre for Advanced Studies, Dublin, Ireland.

This page intentionally left blank

Chapter 1

Introduction: Pandemic and Public Trust

Syaza Shukri

Introduction

Officially, over 6 million individuals have been killed by the COVID-19 pandemic as of the date of this writing in December 2022. This number is challenged by the World Health Organization (WHO) which claimed that there had been nearly 15 million excess deaths in two years of the pandemic as a direct result of the virus and the indirect effect of an overwhelmed healthcare system (Grimley et al., 2022). It is the worst pandemic in recent history and hopefully is the deadliest of this generation. Comparatively, the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic killed almost 50 million people, whereas the fourteenth century bubonic plague or more commonly known as the Black Death had killed an estimated 75 million people (Rosenwald, 2021).

Besides the COVID-19 pandemic, the twenty-first century has seen a number of pandemics and even epidemics. H1N1 flu pandemic of 2009, Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) of 2012, and Zika outbreak of 2015 are only a few examples of recent pandemics. As the first pandemic of the twenty-first century, the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) of 2003 mostly affected countries in East Asia with 93% of deaths being in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore (World Health Organization, 2015).

Similar to COVID-19, pandemic-related death during the twentieth century Spanish flu was also affected by other indirect social or political factors. For example, the high mortality rate in 1918 and 1919 in Iran was influenced by socio-political upheavals during World War I (Afkhami, 2003) and in Lagos, Nigeria due to the colonial administration's racist attitude and negligence (Oluwasegun, 2017). Although there is no hard data as of now, there is suspicion that COVID-19 deaths may also be affected by policy miscalculations by different national governments and even ineffective international cooperation in conceptualising effective measures against COVID-19 especially in the initial stages. Similarly, Malaysia saw political instability in 2020 and 2021 which might have negatively affected the government's response against COVID-19 and thus led to the public's possible negative perception on the government's ability to manage COVID-19 cases in the country.

A public health triumph so far is that the number of deaths has not exceeded those of previous pandemics in the months since the first cases were recorded in Wuhan China in November 2019. Nevertheless, even at the tail end of the pandemic in 2021, COVID-19 should not be taken lightly, with more than half a billion people around the world infected ([World Health Organization, 2022](#)). Although most countries have done away with most social restrictions, COVID-19 is still around, and more than 1.2 million deaths have been attributed to it in 2022.

In addition to public health concerns, unsustainable economic growth, political instability, the digital divide, vaccine inequity, and waning belief in democracy, this pandemic has brought to the fore a slew of other concerns that demand the immediate attention of governments and society at large. Although we will never return to a pre-pandemic world, the vaccination rollout that began in December 2020 has allowed for life to return to a new normal after nearly two years of governments encountering unparalleled hardships in recent history especially in the forms of border closures in a world where no country is fully isolated from the rest of the world.

Many studies have been carried out on effective measures against recent pandemics especially since the H1N1 pandemic, with a particular focus on the numerous nations and regions. For example, [Kohn et al. \(2010\)](#) found that Israel's success in responding to the H1N1 outbreak was due to the strong collaboration between the government and military to maintain services including water, electricity, and telecommunications. There is also a model in China designed by [Weng and Ni \(2015\)](#) to evaluate various techniques, such as contact tracing, quarantining of contacts, detecting of cases, and providing treatment to those who have been infected. We were able to use research of these kinds to get a head start on the COVID-19 pandemic management. Narrowing down to Southeast Asia, [Junadi \(2009\)](#) argued that the best strategy for Indonesia to deal with the H1N1 pandemic was to go upstream and contain the pandemic at stage three and gradually at lower stages. With SARS, Singapore implemented new legislation that relied on the public's voluntary participation. There was a sense of national solidarity as a result of this ([Huat, 2006](#)).

There is no denying the important role that the government plays when it comes to dealing with a massive public health concern such as COVID-19. Thus, the concerning political instability in Malaysia could have compounded the negative impact of COVID-19 compared to if Malaysia has had no change in government. This counterfactual argument is based on the idea that trust towards the government is a significant contributor to a government's resiliency against a deadly pandemic. The apparent variation in national cohesion and public trust in Malaysia presents a compelling case for further investigation of the pandemic's impact on Malaysian government and society. At the start of the pandemic in early 2020, Malaysia's former government, the Pakatan Harapan administration was deposed in a so-called soft coup by internal members who went on to form a new government. Immediately after taking over the seat of power in Putrajaya, the new administration's primary objective became the management of COVID-19 in the country which was seeing an increase in cases by March 2020.

This book thus examines the juncture of the COVID-19 pandemic and Malaysia's political uncertainty in 2020–2021. As Malaysia dealt with waves of COVID-19

infection, there were movements and seismic shifts in the country’s political landscape, beginning with the ‘Sheraton Move’ in February 2020, which toppled the prior government that had won the 2018 elections. Due to political instability, the new government of Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin was viewed as prioritising political survival over public health through a series of policy miscalculations, including the January 2021 ‘State of Emergency’ that prevented Parliament from convening, jeopardising democracy in the process (BBC, 2021). Amid pressure, Malaysian politics underwent a rebranding exercise, and a new prime minister was appointed in 2021 without significant personnel or policy changes.

This is a very topical book, since the pandemic’s impact on Malaysia and her citizens continues to be felt, as does the government’s response to the problem. More crucially, changes to Malaysia’s broader political scene may have a greater impact on how the government is perceived by the public. The public’s faith in the government is directly related to how it has handled the pandemic, which has experienced numerous variations as seen in Table 1.1. This book will delve deeper into these linkages, critically analysing and comprehending them. This book will provide a balanced assessment of Malaysia’s politics during the pandemic, with a particular emphasis on establishing a fair and just society in order to ensure a sustainable future. There have been numerous articles written about Malaysia’s declining democracy during the pandemic (Saleem, 2020), its relationship to the country’s economic well-being (Lim, 2020), and the general government response (Shah et al., 2020), but this book provides an in-depth examination of the political events from a variety of perspectives, including foreign relations, philosophy, gender, and poverty that is tied together by a framework on public trust towards the government. Mckenzie et al. (2022) edited a volume on the post-pandemic world of Southeast Asia and looked at the larger social impact of COVID-19 on various themes including urbanisation, migration, and collective action. This present volume, on the other hand, narrows down the impact of COVID-19 on Malaysia as a microcosm of larger Southeast Asian trends.

This book examines the government’s response to the pandemic and its effect on public trust in government institutions. When government efforts appeared ineffective, not only does it cause political instability but also reluctance by the people to abide by government instructions as exemplified by the protests in China over its zero-COVID policy (Mao, 2022). This present book is interested in examining the impact of the pandemic on Malaysia’s democracy due to fluctuating

Table 1.1. Measures Taken by the Malaysian Government from March 2020.

Measures	Date	Cases
MCO/conditional MCO/recovery MCO	18 March 2020–31 May 2021	Relatively low
Emergency	12 January 2021–31 August 2021	Initially moderate
‘Total lockdown’	1 June 2021–28 June 2021	Very high
National Recovery Plan	15 June 2021–31 December 2021	Moderate

public trust, which is consistent with the field's evolution, but distinct enough to demand its own consideration. We argue that inconsistency in policy execution and ineffective public communication have eroded public confidence in the government's ability to manage COVID-19, particularly between July and September 2021, when cases continued to grow despite the aforementioned 'emergency'. Additionally, we claim that in the midst of this public health crisis, the populace is yearning for stability, resulting in diminishing support for Pakatan Harapan and the opposition in the three state elections that took place in 2021 with the obvious winner being the long-ruling Barisan Nasional government.

By examining Malaysia, we hoped to contextualise the country's crisis within the larger patterns identified in Southeast Asia. While Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand dealt with the pandemic efficiently, Indonesia and the Philippines struggled far more, as seen by authoritarian inclinations, migrant worker exploitation, discontent, and political instability (Marston, 2021). On the other hand, advances in grassroots mobilisation have provided optimism for institutions in Southeast Asia that may experience a decline in public trust. As was the case in 2020, youth protests occurred in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. Although the calls by these protesters were different, they were similar in their discontent towards the government that was exacerbated by the pandemic (Siahaan, 2021). While certain Southeast Asian countries, such as Myanmar and Cambodia, can rule through force, others rely on a level of public support that can swiftly erode in the absence of trust.

In 2021, Southeast Asian countries' inflexibility and repression harmed their fight against the virus. Although the region's government initially succeeded in managing COVID-19 through border closures and other measures such as prohibiting large gatherings, by 2021 it became apparent that these efforts have become unpopular as more people contracted the Delta and Omicron variants of the virus and with the mass availability of vaccines. In this sense, Malaysia's political crisis is unique in terms of circumstances and outcome, but it does not deviate from the trend of its neighbours, which also experienced a deteriorating reputation for their lacklustre score in democracy and transparency. Malaysia, Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, and the Philippines scored lower on Freedom House's freedom score in 2021 compared to the previous year (Kurlantzick, 2021).

Trust in Government

The government, through its various agencies and institutions, is the most able to guide a nation out of a health crisis. An incompetent government would only make a bad situation worse. Here, we do not mean simply pulling its resources to treat the disease but also in terms of communicating with the public in order to instil trust in the government's capability. The research on the relationship between a health crisis, such as a regional epidemic or a worldwide pandemic, and government policy focusses mostly on different governments' responses. Without question, a lack of readiness for a worldwide pandemic will have a negative impact on the global economy, security, and, of course, everyone's health (Osterholm, 2005). On the other hand, Freeman (1995) contends, citing Germany and the United Kingdom as case studies, that the discourse of prevention lends credibility to

government policymaking. In the case of the United States, [Bartlett and Borio \(2008\)](#) believe that significant work remains to be done to prepare for a pandemic, including increasing financing for vaccine development and production, validating social interventions such as mask use, and satisfying peak demand. [Yanzhong \(2009\)](#) adds that surge capacity is a critical component of pandemic preparedness. All in all, there has been a lot of research on government's role in the face of a public health crisis.

Proper preparedness for a pandemic is critical, especially in light of the numerous epidemic outbreaks over the years. For government entities, their response to a pandemic may also be motivated by a desire to protect their reputations ([Baekkeskov, 2017](#)). Unfortunately, [French and Raymond \(2009\)](#) revealed that the strategies for execution during a pandemic in eight US locations are ambiguous in various ways and there is limited involvement with important stakeholders. For instance, during the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic, there were concerns and resistance against school closures in 30 US cities due to a lack of communication with the public and among authorities ([Navarro et al., 2016](#)). This is concerning because it was discovered that increased openness and citizen involvement through mock drills and open access to information would considerably increase local governments' legitimacy ([French, 2011](#)). This research corroborates [Paek et al.'s \(2008\)](#) proposal for public health communicators to build trust and personalise risks in order to win support for activities such as offering partially approved medications. Due to the unique nature of pandemic politics, citizens have been unable to establish coherent preferences on solutions to the pandemic by the use of conventional information sources – mass media, social media, trusted experts, and social circles, for example. This confusion partially explains the reluctance of people even in democratic countries to accept the advice of the scientific community as being politically motivated.

While it is better to have shared policy for preventing and controlling pandemics, various countries continue to disagree. [Ney \(2012\)](#) demonstrates through narrative analysis how a pluralistic approach to health policymaking around the world results in policy disagreement during a health crisis. Pandemic preparedness strategies have been unified across the European Union through the WHO's International Health Regulations; nonetheless, responses to many aspects of pandemic policy continue to differ ([Martin & Conseil, 2012](#)). One explanation for this was the debate over whether to prioritise citizens' individual rights over the common welfare. This is understandable, given there have been instances of regimes using a health crisis to bolster their grip over the populace. For instance, [Oluwasegun \(2017\)](#) believes that the high mortality rate during the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic in Lagos, Nigeria's colonial capital, was related to colonial administrative racism and neglect. Rather than assisting the populace, the health issue was used to advance imperialist interests by emphasising racial superiority. Similarly, President Carranza of Mexico used the 1918 flu pandemic to legitimise his revolutionary government through centralisation ([Alexander, 2019](#)). The struggle against COVID-19 has also served as a rallying cry for support for Malaysia's administrations, despite the changes in prime ministership in 2020 and 2021 not being put to a vote.

Why is trust in the government critical for a nation fighting against the threat of a virus? The government is the most authoritative and legitimate entity to which the public turn to in times of distress to lead a whole-of-society approach. The crisis is mostly of a domestic nature, involving public health policy and the reputation of a particular administration. Notably, even across affluent countries, the amount of trust in governments' management of COVID-19 varied considerably. This is due to the different attitudes and methods used, such as quarantine, which is extremely tight in China, with Shanghai being placed under lockdown even in 2022, but not in Sweden, which has never had a quarantine rule in place since the beginning of the pandemic. In contrast, Australia and New Zealand was subjected to two years of rigorous border controls from March 2020, which was eventually relaxed in 2022. There were also disagreements about the use of mandatory masks, the use of a COVID-19 pass, and that of mandatory vaccinations. As a result of protests against the government, the majority of which have taken place in Europe, the region has struggled to implement pandemic-curbing policies (Roy, 2022). Following an increase in the number of cases at the end of 2021, Belgians, Austrians, Swiss, and Italians took to the streets to demonstrate their opposition to social restrictions and other mandates.

Additionally, there is a dispute about the trade-off between health and the economy, or between lives and livelihoods (Alvarez et al., 2020; Eichenbaum et al., 2021, Farboodi et al., 2020). With more people being vaccinated and despite the relative success of the zero-COVID policy (Marshall, 2022), such debates over COVID-19 mandates and regulations have subsided as more countries prepare to enter an endemic phase in 2022, including New Zealand and Vietnam which have had a zero-COVID policy in place. On the other hand, China has maintained its zero-COVID policy until the end of 2022, which has resulted in further lockdowns and eventual public demonstrations in Communist China (Ni, 2022). Political support was more likely to be garnered by governments that placed a higher emphasis on long-term health outcomes rather than short-term economic aims. Furthermore, the strength of this action increases with time. Trust, on the other hand, is swiftly eroded as the number of reported cases rises, which has a detrimental impact on political approval, particularly if no rigorous safeguards were put in place (Herrera et al., 2020). As such, the issue is not one of rallying behind 'our' leader against an adversary, but rather one of determining if 'our' leader is acting in 'our' best interests in conjunction with a competent administration. This may explain why divisiveness and distrust remain in countries that are struggling to recover.

Citizens' willingness to comply with government instructions and measures is proportional to their level of trust in the institutions that implement those directives and regulations. The general public's trust in the government encourages them to abide by the laws and regulations established by the government. The perception of trust in government increases the likelihood of people following the rules. Because of this, trust in government has been found to promote policy implementation, compliance, and people's willingness to follow through on policy objectives (Saechang et al., 2021). On the other hand, a lack of confidence in the government could result in a drop of popular support for government initiatives. Residents who had a high level of trust in their government were more inclined

to adopt preventative measures as observed during the H1N1 pandemic in 2009 (Gilles et al., 2011). Similarly, even though many Singaporeans were unaware of the nature of the contagious disease, they placed a high level of trust in their government, and the SARS epidemic was successfully contained, with the public satisfied with the government's response (Deurenberg-Yap et al., 2005). Government mistrust has also been connected to a reduced compliance rate with government control measures during the West African Ebola outbreak, according to recent research (Woskie & Fallah, 2019).

No compliance and distrust would be the result if confidence was not established effectively. Increasing the possibility that individuals will comply with policy interventions in times of crisis and, ultimately, lead to successful epidemic control, presents a challenge to a society with low trust in government. Interestingly, the 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer found that the average level of trust in institutions such as the media, government, and business continue to be strong in four Southeast Asian nations studied: Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. It appears that the trust index and the COVID-19 recovery index appear to be correlated. Of course, the report also showed that trust in government is among the lowest, especially in democratic countries.

COVID-19 in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia was one of the first locations outside East Asia to be affected by COVID-19 as the region is geographically close to ground zero of the pandemic. Thailand was the first country outside of China to report a case of COVID-19 on 13 January 2020 whereas the Philippines reported the disease's first death on 2 February 2020. Despite these facts, countries in the region have fared better than their western counterparts since the outbreak of the pandemic. Comparing the performance of 116 countries in the 43 weeks following each country's 100th confirmed case of COVID-19, four Southeast Asian countries, namely Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, and Myanmar performed particularly well in terms of managing COVID-19 cases within their respective countries, according to the Lowy Institute (2021). In addition to early border closures and contact tracing (Huang et al., 2020), lockdowns (Nixon et al., 2021), and public health measures such as handwashing, mask wearing, and physical distancing (World Health Organization, 2020), a number of other factors have been identified as contributing to this success (Meagher, 2020). Generally, the strict measures chosen by these governments and a culture of obedience to authority could explain much of the public's support for these approaches, in line with findings by Lowy Institute that authoritarian regime fared better than democratic government at the beginning of the pandemic. Based on the Recovery Index by the Global Covid Index (2022), Malaysia, the Philippines, Myanmar, and Indonesia have also been doing well in terms of treating and testing patients for COVID-19.

However, subsequent research has also found that the lower death rates in authoritarian countries may have to do more with data omission and manipulation (Cassan & Van Steenvoort, 2021) which support the WHO's assertion that COVID-19 deaths could be much higher especially in lower-middle income

countries (Grimley et al., 2022). In fact, Whiteley (2021) argued that deaths from COVID-19 is proportionally lower in democratic countries than authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes. Democratic governments are better able to deal with public health crises because their health care systems are more robust than those of authoritarian regimes due to the presence of free and fair elections (Templin et al., 2021). A strong public health system, robust test-and-trace regimes, rapid government responses, and widespread community involvement enabled COVID-19 outbreaks in a number of Southeast Asian countries including Singapore and Thailand to be effectively suppressed.

The situation is made worse with political instability in Southeast Asia. For example, a military coup in Myanmar in February 2021 resulted in significant political and health consequences for the country. A campaign of civil disobedience led by healthcare professionals and civil servants was initiated to protest the return of military control in the country. In view of the deteriorating pandemic crisis, frontline health workers made the decision to put their lives in danger by refusing to report to their places of employment (Head, 2022). Throughout 2020, administrations in Thailand and Cambodia worked to silence their critics by targeting students, media outlets, political opposition groups, and human rights advocates among other groups (Khongkachonkiet, 2021). In a similar vein, the Malaysian government has implemented a gag order to restrict civil servants from posting online remarks that are critical of the government's reaction to the outbreak in the country (Palansamy, 2021). Hard-hit countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia dealt with more significant challenges, such as growing authoritarianism, which includes restrictions on free expression (Russell, 2020). Under threat by President Rodrigo Duterte, those who were previously vulnerable have been pushed into even more difficult economic circumstances (Arguelles, 2021). President Joko Widodo of Indonesia has also put in place repressive measures against the media in order to tighten internal control and surveillance in the country. The government in Malaysia has responded harshly to media criticism about the government's handling of migrant workers during the lockdown, including raiding Al Jazeera's office in Kuala Lumpur in response to a documentary that painted the government in a negative light in its efforts to combat COVID-19 (Al Jazeera, 2020).

Unfortunately, the swift and severe measures taken by Southeast governments to curb COVID-19 has had an adverse effect especially on the economy and social well-being of the people. This has been a devastating pandemic, with a devastating impact on the most vulnerable people, and it has highlighted underlying disparities, governance difficulties, and the existing development path's inability to sustain itself. As a result, it has exacerbated existing problems and highlighted new ones, particularly those related to peace, security, and human rights. It was expected that the enormous economic impact of COVID-19 in the region would have a long-lasting detrimental effect on inclusive growth, which in turn would foster a widespread frustration and desire for political change. The impact of such instability would affect the entire region.

During the pandemic, the Indonesian president urged citizens to drink *jamu* or indigenous herbs in order to develop immunity against COVID-19 (Rusmana, 2020). It is comparable to the unscientific advice given by Malaysia's then health