

Mahathir on COVID-19's Impacts and Crisis Responses in Malaysia

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Abstract

At the age of 92, Mahathir Mohamad served his country as the Prime Minister for the second time. But unlike his first stint as the head of the government, which lasted 22 years, this time, his tenure was less than two years. His resignation, which was linked to some internal issues within the Pakatan Harapan (PH) allied parties, came at a time when many countries in the world were in the early stages of the coronavirus outbreak. Mahathir was aware of the power struggle that was adversely affecting the government's response to combat the virus transmission and reduce the rising number of COVID-19 infection cases. With his long experience in governance and as a former medical officer, Mahathir offered some advice and recommendations to the existing government on ways to address the public health crisis. Since the coronavirus outbreak, the domestic political and economic developments also drew his direct criticism and critical commentaries.

Keywords: Malaysia; Mahathir Mohamad; COVID-19; politics; economic.

Introduction

Mahathir is a prominent, accomplished, and seasoned Malaysian statesman and politician. He is very much involved in his country's development, be it politics, economics, or society. Mahathir was born before Malaysia gained independence from Britain in 1957. Thus, he has witnessed how his country strives for development, both before and after independence. "Love him or hate him, support him or fight him, worship him or damn him" (Plate, 2011: 17), Mahathir is the Prime Minister who has transformed Malaysia from near oblivion to a respected international actor.

For seven years, Mahathir served as a medical doctor in Kedah, his birthplace. As he talked about his original intention, he always dreamt of becoming a politician. It was true when he was a member of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) at the age of 21. He pursued his medical studies because he only needed the recognition of a university to gain public trust. He said, "I was a politician first, who became a doctor because without some degree or awards from universities, people would not believe what I say to them" (Camoens, 2018). Mahathir was and still is a very cunning man. When he became a politician, he did not shed his knowledge and expertise in medicine. In fact, he applied the procedure of medical treatment to heal political illness. He explained this while he was delivering a speech back in 2018:

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"In medicine, when you have a problem, you go into history, do some physical examination, X-ray and diagnose the disease and give treatment. In politics, it is the same – administration is also the same, you have a problem, you get to the origins, the problem's history, look at what contributed to the problem, the nature of it and prescribe the medicine for it" (Camoens, 2018).

Despite the fact that Mahathir is no longer the Prime Minister of Malaysia, he remains an active citizen, following almost all issues on the ground attentively. Almost every day, he tweets his message on social media. Regardless of whether his advice influences the country's policies and measures to curb the pandemic, Mahathir is not exhausted to deliver his views, ideas and expertise on this issue. His medical knowledge and practice likely shaped his mind about coping with the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper intends to examine Mahathir's comments and criticisms on Malaysia's crisis responses to COVID-19, including political and economic uncertainties in the country.

A Serious Public Health Risk

Mahathir was fully aware of the danger of the virus. He had received information that the country where COVID-19 was claimed to have originated had taken a critical step to contain the virus' transmission; China enforced quarantine measures to 11 million people in Wuhan, the place where the outbreak had first begun, and closed a few cities in the country. On January 25 2020, Malaysia recorded its first COVID patient who had contracted the virus in Wuhan (Shah et al., 2020). On the same day, during a press conference, Mahathir, who was the Prime Minister then, informed the nation that his administration would not ban Chinese visitors from visiting Malaysia for the time being. Instead, it would rigorously screen all foreign visitors, especially those from China (Camoens, 2018). This decision presumably took into account China's preventative measures and the low number of COVID cases in Malaysia at the time. The economy could also be a crucial factor in this decision making given that Chinese visitors constitute the largest number of tourists in Malaysia. Should Mahathir's administration rush to close its border to the outside world, the potential economic consequences for the country could be far more damaging.

By mid-April, the number of COVID cases in Malaysia decreased due to the government's efforts to control the virus' spread. Travel restrictions, quarantine measures, the Movement Control Order (MCO), and medical screening were examples of these containment manoeuvres (Tang, 2020). The decline, however, was very brief. COVID cases began to rise after the Sabah's state election in June 2020, triggering a 70% increase in new cases in the state. The Sabah election also accounted for the rise in the number of cases in other parts of Malaysia, with an increase of 64.4% in new COVID patients following the election travels made to and from Sabah (Lim et al., 2021).

After more than a year of the global health crisis, the pandemic has killed millions worldwide. Neither Malaysia nor any other country was spared. Between early 2020 and August 2021, the COVID death number in Malaysia had gone up to 12,000

people. The daily cases of infected people also jumped, exceeding 20,000 per day. Mahathir was very concerned by these statistics and closely monitored the situation on the ground (Mohamad, 2021).

Standard Operating Procedures (SOP)

Mahathir believed that the contagious disease was difficult to contain for several reasons. First, the emergence of modern transportation that allowed travellers to reach their destination in just a couple of hours, thereby intensifying human contact. Second, the virus, presumably, has its origins in wild animals, which means that to halt its spread equals curbing the movement of these animals, and that, in itself, was deemed an impossible feat. Another concern expressed by Mahathir had to do with the lack of information on the onset symptoms in individuals who had just contracted the virus.

The term 'Standard Operation Procedures' (SOP) is used during this period to refer to both public, and private preventative measures in managing the spread of the virus, and these include social distancing, mandating quarantine, the wearing of face masks, and observing personal cleanliness (Ting & Edmund, 2021). Mahathir emphasised the importance of adhering to the SOP, which would be an additional layer of protection against minimising the spread of COVID-19. As early as January 2020, Mahathir encouraged the public to wear face masks because the virus had been discovered to be highly infectious and deadly. He also called for the public to be disciplined in adhering to the SOP, even though, as he pointed out, observance practice may not be easy. Mahathir proposed a few simple steps as to how people could make adherence to the SOP more manageable. He advised on the need to be mindful and aware in observing the SOP, particularly in the early days. Observance of the SOP, such as social distancing, the wearing of masks, and the use of hand sanitisers, would eventually become a matter of habit, something that people would inculcate in their lives without much of a thought (Mohamad, 2021).

Mahathir is a Langkawi member of parliament, and very cautious about the potential threat and transmission of the virus to his constituency. When Langkawi, an island famed for its tourism industry, 'opened' in 2021, Mahathir continued to encourage everyone to follow the SOP. He suggested that passengers on flights and ferries should not sit near each other, and one-metre social distancing measures should be practised to curb the virus' transmissibility. However, this transportation arrangement would inevitably mean more trips to Langkawi with fewer passengers on board. Mahathir also encouraged tourists and Langkawi residents to observe the SOP (Mohamad, 2021).

Mahathir's call to observe the SOP was justified as, by the end of July 2021, the number of infected individuals in Malaysia had exceeded the 1 million mark. This indicated that the remaining 31 million people (Malaysia's population is around 32 million) had not yet been afflicted. They were relatively 'safe', according to Mahathir, because of their social distancing practices. Given that the virus is a war machine, the only way to survive the pandemic is by taking it seriously. When people fail to follow the SOP, the daily cases of COVID infection would see an increase. This was exactly what happened in Kelantan, which had remained in phase two of the National

Recovery Plan. Just in one day, the state documented over 1000 COVID-positive patients and people's infringement of the SOP was said to be the main cause for the spike (Bernama, 2021).

Local COVID infection medical specialists also called for the public and government officials to comply with the SOP. The rationale was clear; there was a possibility COVID cases would bounce again, even if the number of positive cases was falling in some areas (Babulal & Ying, 2021). Mahathir's worry about the exigency to adhere to the SOP was consistent with the government's approach; the Minister of Health announced a means by which members of the public could notify the government of people who were blatantly flouting the SOP. Reports could be made via *MySejahtera*, an online application, by clicking on the report button, specifying the misconduct, stating the location, and then uploading a photo of the offence (Rahman, 2021).

National Vaccination Program

Mahathir also strived hard to persuade the public that vaccinations are effective and that any lingering doubts about their use should be dispelled. Vaccination is one of several methods for reducing the number of infection cases, and there was significant pressure to expedite the immunisation programme. When the country's vaccine stockpile was depleted, Mahathir urged the government to accept any available vaccine type, particularly those that had been widely used in other countries (Osman, 2021). He also proposed that the government expedite the approval of additional vaccinations authorised in some other countries. Sputnik V, a Russian-made vaccine, was one such example. When Mahathir made the following remark, "Are we going to test Panadol too? Germany has already approved its usage, but we are still testing it," it was clear that it was an intended jibe towards the government (New Straits Times, 2021).

Despite some glitches, particularly in the early days, the vaccine registration system proved to be key in Malaysia Government's efforts to combat COVID-19. In March 2021, Mahathir called on all Malaysians to register for their vaccination using *MySejahtera*. However, other flaws with the programme had to be addressed immediately; Mahathir continued to highlight his dissatisfaction with the bureaucracy tying up the immunisation programme and stressed the need to ease the vaccination process.

The government had asked people to register, which he claimed delayed the immunisation procedure. According to Mahathir, unlike in the United States, almost 3 million people were vaccinated on a single day. The rapid process could be attributed to government procedures; as Mahathir put it, 'I do not believe they [Americans] had all registered' (New Straits Times, 2021). Rather than requiring registration, as Mahathir remained firm on his proposal, the government should start the immunisation procedure instantaneously. To speed up the vaccination process, Mahathir thought that anyone who wanted to vaccinate should be able to do so by simply visiting a vaccination centre. They merely needed to carry their identification card.

When considering some people who lived in villages and rural areas and their limited capacity to deal with technology, Mahathir's perspective and recommendations on vaccination sounded old-fashioned, yet simple and practical. He also mentioned those who failed to keep immunisation appointments. Mobile immunisation, where the vaccine was delivered from one house to another, would make it easier for these people to acquire the vaccination. The procedure only required a small number of people: two physicians, two nurses, and one assistant. Then, several groups should be formed and dispatched to the communities. To put it differently, dedicated teams should be organised to distribute immunizations to villagers (Mstar, 2021). Once those people have been vaccinated, the staff should gather and record their personal information, such as identity card details and phone numbers.

Large facilities for vaccination programs were beneficial, but additional mobile units were critically needed to ensure more people received immunizations (Mstar, 2021). Failure to speed up the vaccination procedure would result in a surge in new cases and deaths; thus, the lockdown remained in place. Lockdown impacts social well-being, in which suicide cases have lately jumped. This would be a new issue for the government to deal with (Mohamad, 2021).

Commenting on the daily achievement of the vaccination process, Mahathir argued that 500,000 vaccinated people were insufficient, though the fact that these figures could reduce the daily cases. He congratulated the government on this achievement, but he wanted the figures to increase to 800,000 per day (Mohamad, 2021). The reason was that many people around us were infected by the virus and under self-quarantine at home. They lived with the family members, who were free from the infection. Following SOP would be a great challenge in this situation, and thereby self-quarantine proved ineffective (Mohamad, 2021).

Total Vs. Partial Lockdown

Lockdown was the only option for dealing with the infection when vaccines were unavailable. Even if the vaccinations were on their way, as Mahathir said in May 2020, they would take six months to test. When the vaccinations were ready for use, more time was needed to manufacture them in order to meet demand. After all, these processes consumed time (AFP, 2020). Mahathir backed the government's decision to impose a nationwide lockdown beginning in June 2021. But, he noticed that this lockdown was less restrictive, unlike its first-time implementation in 2020. He was vexed when he saw people moving around and working during the lockdown. The road was congested as some people went to work as normal. The lockdown appeared to allow some people to move around, despite various restrictions imposed by the authorities. Accordingly, Mahathir contended that the government name its initiative as a partial lockdown (Mohamad, 2021).

Mahathir insisted on a comprehensive lockdown, requiring everyone, including frontline, to stay at home, avoid gatherings, and maintain social distance. His suggestion, however, entailed significant risk; individuals would lose their income and be unable to afford their meals. To him, the government should hold this responsibility and bear the cost, ensuring that people survive during a hard time. He

went further to propose public kitchens that cooked and distributed meals to the public. Although the cost would be high, the government must execute the total lockdown.

Lockdown's efficacy was unsatisfactory and disappointing. Mahathir concluded that the ongoing lockdown was a failure. The lockdown supposedly curbed the spread of the virus, but the number of deaths and new cases continued to rise on the ground. He also predicted that more cases would be recorded and that more days of lockdown would be reinstated. As Mahathir continued to express his frustration, the public had to pay the price for the government's less stringent measures to curb the spread. He also argued that people's suffering and pain were not in the government's interest. In fact, they had to accept that business sectors had to continue operating since the government could not afford to lose RM2 billion every day (Astro Awani, 2021).

Instead of total lockdown, there could be an alternative and practical approach that centred on individual responsibility. Health director-general, Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah, said that when people moved and some sectors involved mass gatherings in their operations, the number of infected cases would remain. Even though some people refused to follow the regulations, others still had available options to contain the virus. Dr Abdullah urged every individual to adopt self-lockdown to save more lives. Malaysia was battling two new variants, Beta and Delta, which caused high infection rates and fatalities (Astro Awani, 2021).

Self-Quarantine

Self-quarantine is an important step in preventing the virus' transmission. Mahathir was critical of this matter, claiming that home quarantine had resulted in more new cases to boom. When he termed 'multiplier effect of home quarantine cases' in his writing, Mahathir explained in detail and provided an example of how the virus spread. Malaysia, for example, had 17,000 new COVID patients every day, with 1,000 of them being admitted to the hospital because of their worsening health condition. The remaining 16,000 people were quarantined at home. If they failed to follow the SOP obediently, they risked infecting their family members who were not yet infected. It would be even worse if these family members moved around and interacted with other people before they realised they were also infected with the virus. This was how the multiplier worked.

Mahathir emphasized several flaws when the COVID patients had quarantine at home. First, seeking assistance if the patient's health was deteriorating. For example, none of the family members could do anything when the patient was ill. The patient's condition deteriorated over time and eventually brought them to death (Mohamad, 2021). Second, there is a need for oxygen supply. The main problem with the COVID patient was breathing difficulty. Should this situation happen at home, the patient may struggle to breathe because there is no oxygen supply (Karim, 2021). What Mahathir had proposed for a viable solution to home quarantine difficulties was an establishment of temporary quarantine centres. In the United Kingdom, as he referred to, the government had built a temporary hospital with 4,000 beds to treat COVID patients (Mohamad, 2021).

Malaysian Politics During COVID-19

Malaysia's political situation has been relatively vulnerable and insecure since COVID-19 made headlines around the world, beginning with Mahathir's resignation as Prime Minister of Malaysia on 24 February 2020 and his successor, Muhyiddin Yassin of the Bersatu party, on 1 March 2020. During Muhyiddin's premiership, Malaysia's political environment was in good shape, with the COVID-19 issue under control. With some people being compelled to stay at home and others being banned from going out, Malaysia finally had zero local transmission of COVID-19 cases on 1 July 2020 (Ministry of Health, 2021). However, after the election in Sabah on 26 September 2020, the number of COVID patients escalated. Malaysians blamed the election for the unexpected rise in cases. They started questioning politicians' integrity and credibility, culminating in a bleak political situation in Malaysia. This includes Mahathir, who always comments on politics, the economy, and the state's well-being. His opinions and advice deem necessary for his country and beyond. This section, therefore, will examine Mahathir's views on democracy, elections, emergency powers, and Malaysia's uncertain political climate.

The State of Emergency

The Malaysian government had proposed the state of emergency, which later was granted by His Majesty the Yang Dipertuan Agong (YDPA). The Proclamation of Emergency was in line with the powers conferred by Clause (1) of Article 150 of the Federal Constitution (Kheong, 2021). It was made public immediately after the prime minister imposed tighter restrictions on COVID-19-affected states. The national emergency was the first time it had been proclaimed in more than 50 years, and just the second time, parliament had been suspended since the country gained independence from Britain in 1957 (Reuters, 2021).

The state of emergency and a suspension of parliament were believed to help the cabinet and prime minister immediately combat COVID-19. However, Mahathir had a different view on this government's approach. He contended that the emergency proclamation was unnecessary to deal with the pandemic (Mohamad, 2021). The reason was that the government had a lot of power, and Malaysians had always followed the government's orders or directives regarding COVID-19. They did not raise any objections to these orders. Malaysia, according to Mahathir, was not like liberal Western countries where individuals openly challenged government orders and claimed that their rights and freedoms were being abused (Mohamad, 2021).

Malaysia took a range of actions to curb the spread of COVID-19 from January 2020, most notably by enacting the MCO. The MCO's implementation was viewed as effective, thanks to robust enforcement and greater COVID-19 awareness, which resulted in a decrease in new COVID-19 cases in April 2020 (Tang, 2020). Based on the declining trend of active COVID-19 cases in 2020, the Malaysian experience suggested that public compliance and collaboration were important components for the effectiveness of government interventions to contain COVID-19 (Tang, 2020).

Some believed the Emergency Proclamation had helped the prime minister escape imminent leadership challenges (Mohamad, 2021). It also gave extraordinary powers to the cabinet and the Prime Minister in which they could introduce laws without consent and approval from parliament. In his blog and on Twitter, Mahathir said the Emergency Ordinance that Muhyiddin's government had been implementing was a form of violation of democracy. He wrote, "With the emergency in force, the power of the Prime Minister is above challenge. There is no more democracy." (Mohamad, 2021). He also believed the emergency proclamation was seen as an act that killed democracy because no vote of agreeing or disagreeing was held; the Proclamation of a State of Emergency removed the last vestige of democratic rights of the people (Mohamad, 2021). This position had also been backed by Rafidah Aziz, one of the stateswomen of the country. As Anand R. (2021) reported, Rafidah Aziz, in her Facebook post, believed the emergency declaration would affect parliament, democratic processes, and disregarding democratic norms was excessive (Anand, 2020). The government did not require a majority to pass legislation with this emergency power. As a result, the majority of the opposition denounced this emergency action (Anand, 2020).

The outcome of democratic processes could be altered at any time. Mahathir (2021) said that people might choose their government through elections; but, the government could now change without an election, and the people's choice can be replaced with the government that the people had rejected. He stated on Twitter that the losers governed Malaysia and the winners were the opposition. Based on the two changes of administration under COVID-19 and the declaration of emergency, Malaysia's democratic system was a complete mess. In other words, the Malaysian democracy seemed to be non-functional after the power shift in 2020 until Muhyiddin quit, especially when the YDPA declared an emergency.

Despite Mahathir's criticism of the national emergency, according to Freemalaysianews (2021), he and Rafizah Aziz considered it was an excellent attempt to battle and handle the surge of COVID-19 cases in Malaysia (Aiman & Ariff, 2021). However, Mahathir also criticized the administration for failing to maintain law and order with this emergency decree. On the other hand, the government had implored citizens to obey and respect all laws. As a result, he believed the Malaysian people should ignore the law (Aiman & Ariff, 2021).

When it came to democracy, Mahathir thought that one of the most fundamental aspects of democracy was that governments and citizens must adhere to the Rule of Law (Mohamad, 2021). In a tweet, Mahathir asserted that if the government committed to the Rule of Law, Malaysia would have good governance, and the law would protect the people. Unfortunately, with the unmanageable COVID-19 cases, Malaysians observed laws being exploited to accomplish neither democratic nor just goals (Mohamad, 2021).

Elections and COVID-19

Democratic elections are an integral part of any country that follows a parliamentary and democratic system. Malaysia's most recent general election (GE14) was held in

2018, and Parti Pakatan Harapan won with a simple majority. Pakatan Harapan is a coalition of several parties, including the Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, the Parti Keadilan Rakyat, the Democratic Action Party, and the Parti Amanah Negara, that won 113 seats in parliament (New Straits Times, 2018). Mahathir was concerned about the implications of a simple majority. If the government were changed, the new government would also be weak because of the simple majority. Any subsequent political action would only exacerbate the situation. Mahathir went on to say that the attempt to seize power was the root of political problems.

The resignation of Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin and three by-elections in Batu Sapi, Gerik and Bugaya demonstrated a series of political instabilities in Malaysia. This was even worse when the declaration of a national emergency led to the postponement of elections (Manimaran, 2021). This showed that if the government were unable to handle the COVID-19 health crisis, the democracy in Malaysia would be in jeopardy. According to the initial announcement, the three by-elections would be held after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The timing of the country's general election should be carefully considered. As a long-time political actor, Mahathir argued that the GE15 should not be held if COVID-19 cases in Malaysia remained high, even if the GE15 would have to be held in 2022. Holding elections next year, or at any period deemed "dangerous", as Mahathir explained, might result in a spike in the number of COVID-19 cases in Malaysia. The direct relationship between government effectiveness and the COVID-19 pandemic was apparent. He then recommended that national elections be called in 2023 when the current parliamentary term ends (MalaysiaKini, 2020).

Because of the COVID-19 outbreak, GE15 was predicted to be difficult to call. Despite the fact that the two by-elections, Chini (in Pahang) and Slim River (in Perak), were held smoothly and effectively amid the coronavirus outbreak, most people were unprepared to vote, especially for GE15 and PRN Sarawak (MalaysiaKini, 2020). People learned from the Sabah state election in 2020, which resulted in a substantial surge of COVID-19 cases. This event made them anxious and angered. In his tweet, Mahathir also expressed his dissatisfaction with the idea of holding an election, citing the consequences of the Sabah election, which led to increased COVID-19 infections (Aiman & Ariff, 2021).

An adequate preparation was necessary before the election was called. Mahathir explained that Malaysia needed to develop herd immunity before GE15 could be held (MalaysiaKini, 2020). By October 7, 2021, a total of 20,786,568 individuals or 88.8 percent of the adult population, had received two doses of COVID-19 vaccine shots (Azaman, 2021). Given that nearly 90% of the population had received the full vaccination, the people would be given a lot of freedom, including the future polls. Hence, according to Mahathir, GE15 should not be done while COVID-19 cases remained high in Malaysia, yet the least the government could do was achieve herd immunity.

In keeping with Mahathir's idea, the Election Commission of Malaysia (EC), which oversaw Malaysia's voting system, voiced concern about elections conducted during COVID-19. When the COVID-19 outbreak struck the country, Abdul Ghani Salleh, Chairman of the Election Commission, concurred with Mahathir that general or state elections were unsuitable. It was difficult, he claimed, to keep people safe during the health crisis. Abdul Ghani said this when asked to comment on the Sarawak State Election (PRN): "I beg when the epidemic is raging, if possible there will be no election (held) this time" (MalaysiaKini, 2020). According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), almost 80 countries have postponed various types of elections, including general elections, by-elections, local government elections and referendums following COVID-19 since the beginning of this year (MalaysiaKini, 2020). Moreover, Malaysia is still not ready to host elections amid the COVID-19 pandemic, and Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) are still not properly followed.

Mahathir Initiative - The National Operations Council (NOC)

Malaysia had once formed the National Operations Council (NOC) or *Majlis Gerakan Negara* (MAGERAN) to address the racial issue in the 13 Mei tragedy. During the 1969 emergency, a comparable administrative body was established as the de facto government (Guler, 2021). MAGERAN, which was in power for two years, was thought to have allowed Malaysia's second Prime Minister, Abdul Razak Hussein, to solve the country's political crisis by inviting opposition parties to join the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, giving the coalition an even larger majority.

In his Twitter address, Mahathir expressed concern about the COVID-19 situation and the economy and social problems, which would worsen because there was no urgency and no idea how to deal with this issue. He remarked on the government's apparent lack of urgency during the COVID-19 administration, despite many Malaysians experiencing financial hardship and losing loved ones due to the pandemic (Aiman & Ariff, 2021). He went on to say that a "unity government" had not been discussed and that it could only function properly if the right people were in place.

Malaysia faced several internal crises from 2020 to 2021, including a political crisis, an economic crisis, and a health crisis that did not appear to end except with immunised herds. Aware of these three issues, Mahathir proposed establishing MAGERAN to take over government administration and offered himself to lead it (Chung, 2021). An expert council akin to the MAGERAN of 1969, according to Mahathir, should be apolitical. On 12 June 2021, Mahathir tweeted that the Council Members would be medical experts, including psychiatrists, non-partisan economists with experience assisting the country in overcoming the crisis, experienced investment experts and social mobilizers with evidence of ability to help people during pandemics, non-partisan legal figures, and some political figures who did not act on behalf of the party. The membership would be limited to no more than 20 people. The National Rehabilitation Council was free of politics (Mohamad, 2021). This council would be effective because it would just include all these members.

Mahathir believed that repeating the history of 1971 would be successful and that MAGERAN would deal with the impact of COVID-19.² MAGERAN could assist the government in combating the COVID-19 crisis and in addressing a political and economic crisis. Mahathir stated on Twitter that he and his team knew how to combat the crisis, but it was impossible to put it into action because they were not part of the government and had no authority (Teoh, 2021). Mahathir recognised his limitations, saying, "We have a lot of ideas on how to manage these challenges, but we cannot implement them if there is not a council set up" (Aiman & Ariff, 2021).

However, Mahathir's proposal was rejected by his opponents. Pakatan Harapan (PH) rebuffed Mahathir's proposal to establish a body similar to Mageran to address the country's problems that resulted from the COVID-19 outbreak. Three senior PH leaders were briefed on the situation: the opposition leader and PKR president, Anwar Ibrahim; the president of Parti Amanah Negara (AMANAH), Mohamad Sabu; and the DAP secretary-general, Lim Guan Eng. PH rejected Mahathir's proposal because the current state of emergency should end immediately, and Parliament reconvened rather than handing over the country's administration to MAGERAN (Adnan, 2021). "Pakatan Harapan believed that the solution to people's problems in the COVID-19 issue, economy, and even politics required a well-functioning democracy, and the best place to listen to the voice of the people and find a solution was in Parliament," Anwar Ibrahim (opposition leader) explained in a joint statement issued on 11 June 2021. Marzuki Mohamad, the Prime Minister's Private secretary-general, also expressed his opinion, stating that the proposed establishment of MAGERAN was not an appropriate step because it would impede the government's plans to address the current health and economic crisis (Adnan, 2021).

Economic Impacts and Prospects of Recovery

Mahathir saw COVID's economic impact as enormous and disastrous like other observers. He cited the tourism sector, where the ban entry had caused the cancellation of flights and hotels. Later, this development precipitated billions of ringgit losses to the tourism industry. Mahathir described the pandemic impact on every stage of the tourism sector: 'Because of this pandemic, tourists cannot travel anywhere. The whole tourism industry will suffer - hotels will suffer, restaurants will suffer, supplies will suffer, everyone will suffer' (The Straits Times, 2020). So did the other economic sectors, much more upset by the MCO. When the government imposed the restriction movement, workers stayed at home. Consequently, they stopped producing goods and delivering services, which, in due course, impaired business performance and wealth creation (The Straits Times, 2020).

In 2021, a Japanese automobile firm, Toyota, suspended the operations of its two plants in Malaysia. Mahathir was upset by this situation and worried that Malaysia was no longer appealing to foreign investors. Instead, they could direct their

² The government established MAGERAN on 16 May 1969 and MAGERAN was dismissed in 1971 (Esa & Ationg, 2020).

investment to another country, Indonesia. To him, this scenario would adversely affect the Malaysian economy (Choong, 2021).

While the reason for the suspension was related to MCO, Mahathir appeared to have slightly modified his previous stance on limiting people from going to work. Now, he held the view that the people could do the work unless the working environment would unlikely cause the virus transmission. In his words, "I am not saying it is wrong to stop others from going to work due to COVID-19 safety precautions. But there must be a way to ensure one can work while determining infections will not occur so easily" (Choong, 2021).

The government's spending on COVID-19 crisis response, as Mahathir claimed, was massive. His curiosity about this matter was intense in the sense that the government had consumed roughly RM600 billion for this response within a short period. However, the outcome of this spending was most likely unexpected; the government had relatively limited capability to combat the pandemic (Mohamad, 2021). Mahathir assumed the national economic recovery of his country would begin when the COVID restrictions were lifted. The recovery would consume some time as Malaysia needed to redevelop its economic fundamentals. Nevertheless, it could be swift and speedy if Malaysians were working very hard. At the September 2021 parliamentary session, Mahathir urged all Malaysians to prepare for a new type of economy in the aftermath of the pandemic. This economy's nature would be different from previous ones. Malaysia was expected to consolidate a knowledge-based economy that relied heavily on IT and artificial intelligence (AI) (Placeholder2) (Carvalho, Rahim, & Tan, 2021).

Conclusion

When Malaysia was battling against COVID-19, Mahathir made constructive comments to improve the government's approach and public measures for dealing with the threat to national health security. His government took a serious step weeks before his resignation as Prime Minister, screening the health of international visitors at the border. Mahathir wanted the fight against COVID-19 to be more impactful, so he insisted on punitive movement control, a strict adherence to SOP, and a swift vaccination programme. He called for a greater concern for public health when he pointed out the shortcomings of self-quarantine.

Malaysia was also struggling with another battle: a series of abrupt changes in the country's leadership in a short period. Power-hungry political parties and politicians caused considerable political turbulence in the country. Mahathir advised that herd immunity be formed prior to the upcoming general election. He disagreed with the declaration of a state of emergency, which he saw as a threat to democracy. He proposed the formation of the NOC in order to address the country's dire COVID-19 situation.

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