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COVID19 A PARADIGM SHIFT IN NATIONAL SECURITY

An Overview of Malaysian Securitization and Response

a chapter by

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Abstract

The covid-19 virus swept the world by surprise in late 2019, and in 2020, it changed the world as we know it today. The pandemic is not just changing the health aspect of the world but also sending a clear signal on the aspect of security. For once the headline of most major news in the world was not war or a terrorist attack but an increasing number of the population that succumbs to the disease. This article will view the shifting paradigm of nation security in securitizing the pandemic to formulate a response. The tenet of Buzan's securitization theory will be used to analyze the reaction of the Malaysian government in handling the issues that clearly impact the status quo of Malaysia's social, politic and economy. The MCO or Movement Control Order implemented by the Malaysian government in Mac 2020 followed by the declaration of Emergency and the suspension of parliament is not without debate whether the securitization of these issues is supposed to combat the pandemic threat or as a political tool for power consolidation. Hence, this paper aims; i. to maps Covid 19 as a new threat to the National Security in Malaysia, ii. to analyse securitization on the spread of Covid-19 in Malaysia, iii. to identify the critics in term of economy and politics towards government response of Movement Control Order (MCO) in Malaysia.

Keywords: *Securitization; National Interest; MCO & Malaysian Government*

Introduction

Malaysia saw the first case of COVID19 surface in January 2020 with the arrival of Chinese nationals via Singapore. The case then established a foothold with several clusters that had been triggered locally such as the Tabligh cluster. With the presence of COVID19 in Malaysia and the steady cases on the rise, it is clear that measures need to be taken by the authorities to mitigate the threat (Chris F.S., et al., 2020). Under the name of security and the perseverance of public health safety, Malaysian authorities declare the so-called Movement Control Order (MCO) under the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act 1988 and the Police Act 1967. MCO is targeted to reduce public movement hence the risk of the infectious disease to spread. MCO includes limiting international travel, prohibiting interstate travel, encouraging work from home, closing some public spaces, requiring the use of masks and hand sanitizers, quarantine, social isolation and limiting the household movement to single person per house only for food and necessity restock purpose. The arrival of the COVID19 could not have come at a better time for Malaysians as the country was at a political crisis. The MCO proclaimed by the authority came from a new government established less than a month after the collapse of Pakatan Harapan, the ruling government that won the 2018 election.

Non-Traditional Security (NTS) and Securitization

The paradigm of non-traditional security has widely opened the paradigm on how security and threat are viewed by the state. NTS issues continue to pose a danger to the well-being

of nations and society in Asia and around the world. The broadness sense of threat issues no longer stipulated only on the threat from war but expanded to health, food, cyberspace, economy, smuggling, human trafficking, drugs and many other things. Non-Traditional Security is regarded as a non-military source that endangers the well-being of the nations, societies and communities (Tajudin et al., 2020).

NTS issues are progressively becoming the highest priority for most governments and policymakers in Asia, as well as in other parts of the world. In summary, proponents of NTS wanted to extend and deepen today's concept of security so that those most vulnerable, which are the non-state actors, political entities, organizations, and human individuals can have a bigger part in providing or ensuring their own security (Caballero-Anthony M., 2018). One of the most serious global Non-Traditional Security risks is the COVID-19 pandemic. This worldwide health crisis has resulted in an unacceptably high number of deaths and a significant economic impact.

Securitization theory, which is employed as a framework analysis, is the basic theory that underpins the analysis in this study. Securitization developed from Copenhagen School (COPRI – Copenhagen Peace Research Institute) of security studies pioneered by Barry Buzan, Ole Weaver and Jaap De Wilde (1998), which stress upon the role of non-traditional security. The term securitization was coined by Ole Weaver in 1993 and has since become one of the tenets in understanding non-traditional security issues (Caballero-Anthony M., 2016). The security issue now encompasses more than just militarization; it has also evolved to include other challenges, one of which is a health issue that can be viewed as a security issue (Clara E., 2018).

There are several components that must be considered in securitization in order to perceive an issue as a security issue. The first component relates to securitizing actors who play a role in declaring something that is existentially threatened. The government, represented by high-ranking officials, lobbyists, and even pressure from a group are all examples of securitizing

actors. Next is the issue or threat that potentially brings harmful effects towards peace and stability of the country and lastly is the reference object or who needs the security. This is how actors assure the survival of the things they want to save. Therefore, this idea will be used to analyse whether it can be considered as a security issue or not.

Covid19 Poses a New Type of Threat to National Security in Malaysia

National security can be defined as protection against military and non-military dimensions. Previously, it is concerned with collective and global security, as well as international law, whereas nowadays it is much more concerned with politics, economy, cyber security, energy, homeland security, and environmental security (Kim R.H., 2014). Malaysia has a National Security Policy that was established in 2013 that emphasizes the importance of maintaining the country's sovereignty, national security, and public order. It also focuses on national unity, the democratic system, illegal immigrants and refugees, territorial claims, extremism and terrorism, cyber security, disasters, crises, transnational crimes, pandemics and contagious illnesses, energy security, food security, and nuclear weapons (Noor D.O., et al., 2021). Even though public health issues may not come under this category but the Covid-19 pandemic has transformed our perceptions of what constitutes a threat to national security as it can be seen that the disease has caused instability to our economic, social, and political situation in Malaysia.

Therefore, Covid 19 poses as a new type of threat to National Security in Malaysia. As mentioned by Katz and Singer (2007) "as far as pandemics could lead to destabilization or disruption of social order, political agitation, and impairment of the economy, they qualify as security concerns". Besides, Evans (2010) also shares the same view that "emerging diseases and their pandemic potential pose perhaps an even greater national security threat, particularly in this era of globalization when the disease can spread more rapidly than in previous eras". National Academies Press (2017) also mentioned that "national security is not just about protection from

state and non-state actors, but also encompasses protection from emerging infectious diseases and other health outcomes that can threaten a nation's economic vitality and its very way of life". As a result, it's crucial for the government to develop legal, public-health, and administrative measures to guarantee that the laws are successful in dealing with the situation. Thus, Covid-19 might be considered a national security concern in this regard.

Covid19 and Malaysia's Response

The new government emerged after Pakatan Harapan downfall, quickly addressing the COVID19 issue as an imminent threat to Malaysia and the wellbeing of its people. Led by the newly appointed Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, the authority quickly develops measures to counter the rising cases of the disease. This was the first time Malaysia faced a disease outbreak at national level which engulfed all of its fourteen states. Since threats need to be taken care of, Malaysia mobilizes its police, army and other security apparatus to implement the Movement Control Order (MCO) to quell the disease from further spreading. Securitizing of this threat clearly marks Malaysia's response to a new breed of threat which at national level is clearly threatening the entirety of the nation. The authority or the new government of Perikatan Nasional act as the securitizing actor, the pandemic as a threat that needs to be combat, and the people of Malaysia as the reference object that need the protection.

The Ministry of Health (MoH) played a critical role in ensuring that the country was well prepared to stop the virus from spreading. The implementation of health screening at all ports of entry was one of the first steps done by the MoH to prevent disease spread. One of the tactics, according to the Director-General of the Ministry of Health, Datuk Dr. Noor Hisham Abdullah, was to deploy thermal scanners (Tiffany C., 2020). The MoH and the government then took the important step of increasing the number of hospitals that could treat COVID-19 cases to combat the disease from spreading. A joint effort between public and private institutions, including university hospitals and Ministry of Defence

hospitals, was also established to handle the increased number of infection cases (Yaakop et al., 2020).

To support the Ministry of Health's efforts to curb the spread of the disease and reduce death, MCO was implemented in March 2020 enforced by Malaysian police, army, The People's Volunteer Corps (RELA) and the health department aims to limit the people's movement so that the virus cannot spread fast. This was done by limiting travel, banning interstate movement, closing the economic activity and center to avoid crowds . The MCO lockdown Malaysia for a period of time in the name of security and national interest as the threat of COVID19 if unchecked can have a dire effect on the whole country.

To break the transmission by restricting movement and contact, the Government imposed a Movement Control Order (MCO) starting from 18 March and extended to 12 May 2020. By limiting human contact via MCO the country was able to flatten the curve of the virus spreading among the society. This can be seen clearly fruitful when MCO was lightened in June 2020 and Malaysia saw a tremendous decline of daily cases. The country however faces a new wave of spread in January 2021 with the rise of daily cases. This was attributed as the adverse effect of Sabah by election in September 2020. Authorities again quickly took the measure to implement the MCO with hopes to combat the once again security issue by COVID19. MCO again tightened the grip on Malaysians in early 2021 until now, even though certain economic activities are permitted to function normally. The Prime Minister also declared a state of emergency and suspended the parliament as a measure to control coronavirus infections and ensure safety of the people and the best interest of the country (The Edge Market, 2020).

Critics of the Government Response of MCO

The authority's intent, although benevolent in nature to safeguard the life of citizens, was not without critics. The securitizing of COVID19 and the measure taken by the government via MCO with the sole objective of saving and protecting people did have some unintended consequences.

On the economic front, the lockdown is proving to be a financial disaster. The economy is collapsing, having a devastating impact on employment, earnings, and livelihoods, disrupting supply lines and upsetting businesses, and worsening inequality, poverty, and suffering, especially for the poor.

MCO and lockdown of the economic sector resulted in the Malaysian economy contracting more than 5% in 2020. The inability of business to run during MCO and lockdown contributed much in the closing of small and medium companies which cannot bear the cost to keep them afloat despite the government stimulus plan. Unemployment rate skyrocketed from a little above 3% to nearly 4.6% with an estimated 600,000 losing their jobs. Since the introduction of the movement control order (MCO) in March, 99,696 Malaysians have lost their employment, according to the Human Resources Ministry (The Star, 2021).

The Statistics Department of Malaysia discovered that workers in the aviation, hotel, and tourist industries are particularly impacted by Covid-19. Critics like renowned economist, Prof Dr K. S. Jomo blamed the government for failing to learn from countries such as South Korea and Japan that dealt with the pandemic successfully without locking down the society and economy. Jomo said that the measures to help the wellbeing of the people by combating the virus by MCO and lockdown end up hurting the people most when the economic security hangs in balance.

Political Critics Government Response of MCO

When the new government formed in March 2020, it was not via the mandate of election but by measure taken by Yang Dipertuan Agong of Malaysia in order to solve the political crisis upon the fall of Pakatan Harapan. The new Perikatan Nasional came into power in 2020 with a very slim majority in the parliament. This small majority was putting the government on edge of collapsing via shifting support of the members of parliament.

The instability of this also contributed to the measure taken by the Prime Minister to declare a state of emergency and suspend the parliament, a move that was seen by the opposition as a clear breach of democratic practice in Malaysia. Many argue that the suspension of the parliament will give an unchecked power to the government and this can lead to the abuse of power. The emergency also gives the Prime Minister and his cabinet extraordinary powers, such as introducing laws without the approval of parliament. With parliament suspended the prime minister and his cabinet gain powers to make laws and approve the expenditure necessary to ensure public security without a parliamentary vote.

As reported by New Straits Times on 11th May 2021, stated that as the country enters its third lockdown, the Malaysian government's reaction to the Covid-19 outbreak has been criticized for its lack of coordination and crisis communication. This is due to the confusion over changing Covid-19 protocols which was worsened by the dynamic nature of fluctuating infections in the country. The State of Emergency had been declared until August of 2021, and the country again is under strict MCO. Again, the measure of securitizing the issues of COVID19 seems to have adverse effects as another security threat to the practice of democracy in Malaysia.

Conclusion

Handling the security issues such as the nationwide pandemic in time of political and economic instability in Malaysia is a very hard job since it is the first and without any historical experience to refer to. Mely Caballero Anthony and Lina Gong (2020), stated that the securitization process will only work if a government, particularly one in a democratic country gains public acceptability and support for certain policies and initiatives. Solving one problem then creating another is not a measure of a successful management of the crisis, but the government did try the best to soften and cushion the impact of COVID19. The economic stimulus package such as PENJANA may not be a magic wand to waive off all the economic problems but thus play a role in sustaining the economy for time in this pandemic. The clear solution and

endgame in any security measure must be the complete removal of the threat. The Nationwide Vaccination Program that was implemented in early 2021 should be one of the significant security improvements in combating the threat of COVID19. The political and economic issues can be slowly solved and mitigated once the virus has been thwarted. The experience of Malaysia in securitizing the issues of COVID19 pandemic can be seen as how important the securitizing actor must play an important role in making sure the reference object (the people that need to be protected) understand clearly and accepting that the threat of COVID19 (which is the security issue) is worth the security measure taken and implemented by the authority.

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