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Global Health Security

COVID-19: Trying Times for Singapore's Social Resilience

By Nazneen Mohsina

SYNOPSIS

As Singapore deals with COVID-19, the social resilience of its citizens is also being tested. Notwithstanding the initial panic among some, the country has so far displayed a rather sturdy spirit in the face of this new public health crisis that has spread globally.

COMMENTARY

THE EVOLVING COVID-19 situation in Singapore has engendered questions about the country's resilience and social cohesion at a time of heightened stress. The [authorities raised the health alert level](#) from Yellow to Orange, the second highest Disease Outbreak Response System Condition level, signalling the spread of the disease was intensifying. This triggered public panic and resulted in distasteful social behaviour.

Scores of Singaporeans [hoarded](#) rice, instant noodles, and toilet paper, fearing that the country would go into lockdown. Online grocery store [Redmart](#) announced it had limited delivery slots due to a sudden 300% surge in demand. [NTUC FairPrice](#), Singapore's largest supermarket chain's website temporarily went offline. There was also hoarding and profiteering from the sale of masks and hand sanitisers on online marketplaces. With surgical masks sold out at most pharmacies, [scammers online](#) also allegedly sold masks and reneged on orders.

Containing Xenophobia & Public Panic

[Xenophobic](#) remarks about Chinese nationals were already making rounds on the Internet as the virus spread. After the raised health alert, there were also reports of landlords stigmatising and even evicting mainland Chinese tenants who were on quarantine or leave of absence.

Some members of the public also [shunned healthcare workers](#) from taking public transport, fearing they might contaminate it. Social media platforms were also bombarded with [information and misinformation](#) from myriad sources.

To allay public anxiety, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong [released a recorded message](#) on television and online, assuring Singaporeans that there was no need to panic as the country was not being locked-down, and there were ample supplies of essentials for everyone. He described the outbreak as a test of Singapore's social cohesion and psychological resilience.

He said while "fear and anxiety are natural human reactions", panic would undermine Singapore's reputation in the international community and can do more harm than the virus itself.

Singapore has no choice but to be extra vigilant and transparent in its fight against COVID-19. The government has implemented a series of measures to reduce the risk of imported cases and community transmission of the deadly disease. Singapore is looking to [develop local manufacturing capabilities](#) of masks as export regulations tighten elsewhere. It has established a highly sophisticated contact-tracing mechanism to track every known possible contact of those infected so they can be quarantined or monitored.

Defending Public Health

According to a study by the Harvard School of Public Health, Singapore has a "[gold standard](#)" [detection capability](#). However, the study also notes that Singapore's detection is "probably not 100 percent efficient", and the number of asymptomatic or low-severity cases overlooked is unknown. Singapore also [shut its borders to China](#) and has enforced a [strict 14-day leave of absence for Chinese nationals](#) returning from the mainland who are permanent residents or have work permits.

The country has a zero-tolerance approach to any breaches of the measures it has put in place. People who [breach Quarantine Orders](#) stand to be fined. In addition, the Ministry of Manpower has also [revoked work passes, repatriated, and](#) barred violators from working in Singapore permanently. Indeed this week, on 28 February, a China couple will be charged for giving false information and obstructing contact tracing, according to the Ministry of Health.

In order to keep the public updated on the latest outbreak information and combat rumours and fake news, the government has set up an [official page](#) and communication software that provides daily updates to subscribers.

The government has also emphasised [the ethos of Singapore's Total Defence](#) policy to highlight how every Singaporean needs to play a part to overcome this national

challenge. Total Defence was launched in 1984 as a national defence initiative to rally all citizens behind the Singapore Armed Forces during war.

The framework has since evolved to bolster resilience of Singaporeans and address new threats, including non-military adversities such as economic recessions, pandemics, cyber security breaches, and natural disasters. Accordingly, social resilience refers to a society's ability to collectively tolerate, absorb, cope with, and adjust to threats of various kinds resulting from social, political, and environmental challenges.

Singaporeans' Quiet Civic Spirit

The initial panic among some appears to have been contained. Undeniably, despite the negative behaviour, most Singaporeans swiftly adjusted to the outbreak and showed considerable calm and rationality. Singaporeans have not only called out the disgraceful behaviour by some, there are also accounts of them [giving out masks and hand sanitizers](#) to fellow citizens, [bringing food](#) to people on leave of absence, offering to [ferry healthcare workers](#) to and from the hospitals, among other things.

There have also been [numerous initiatives in the community](#) by charities and social service agencies – who have mobilised to distribute meals, hand sanitisers and masks to the vulnerable in their community, share important public health messages, [rally the community](#) to take ownership and commit to upholding good hygiene practices, and raise funds to support the various efforts towards battling COVID-19.

Singapore-based Facebook crowdsourcing platform, [StandUpFor.SG](#) invited people to write notes of encouragement for healthcare workers, which the group disseminates to healthcare institutions. Insofar, more than a thousand contributions have come in from the general public, schools and non-profit organisations, including a Valentine's Day card by the Prime Minister. Businesses have also collaborated with the group to make the initiative a success.

Additionally, many unions and organisations gave out [care-packages to workers](#) on the frontline of Singapore's efforts against the ongoing threat. [AIA Singapore](#) announced offered free additional coverage for all its existing customers, employees and tied representatives. Businesses have also [stepped up precautionary and business continuity measures](#) to mitigate the risk of a spread.

Going Forward

The Government has set up [a centralised platform](#) to coordinate and convene the various ground-up efforts – and [urged Singapore](#) to continue acting as a community and turn fears and anxieties into concrete action to contribute in the fight against the epidemic.

To conclude, Singapore has displayed rather sturdy social resilience during this crisis. While the deplorable behaviour of some Singaporeans cannot be denied or condoned, [some argue](#) that Singaporeans might have coped better if information was disseminated in a more timely manner by the authorities at the initial stage.

Specifically, if the orange alert news was communicated with clearer and timelier explanation, Singaporeans might have been better prepared psychologically and acted appropriately. People were unsure about the meaning of the various colour-coded alerts and how they translate into practice – especially as they watched and compared how the COVID-19 situation was unfolding in other countries.

This could explain the relative calm that followed the response and assurances from the government later. As [Professor Tommy Koh reiterated](#), Singapore has historically proven to be able to withstand major crises. If it continues to remain cohesive and resilient, it can overcome the COVID-19 pandemic, too.

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