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*Global Health Security
COVID-19 & Its Impacts*

Federal-State Ties: Rising Tensions & the Pandemic

By Jose Ricardo Domingo

SYNOPSIS

The Malaysian government's handling of COVID-19 has been undermined by continued tensions in federal-state relations.

COMMENTARY

AMIDST RISING COVID-19 cases and a slower than hoped-for vaccine rollout, state governments have demanded to procure their own vaccine supply. In April 2021, Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim [claimed](#) that Selangor and Sarawak were being stonewalled by the federal government.

Khairy Jamaluddin, Coordinating Minister for the National COVID-19 Immunisation Programme, countered that he had positively responded to state governments, which were free to acquire their own vaccines in coordination with the federal government. The Penang government in May 2021 took issue with the federal government denying its request to accept a vaccine offer from a private donor. Khairy claimed the offer was "[a scam](#)".

Vaccine Rollout

Asian countries are confronting rising cases of more contagious and virulent COVID-19 strains. But Malaysia's Perikatan Nasional (PN) government also has to contend with mounting political pressures from within its allies and the Opposition, which are magnified in federal-state tensions over COVID-19.

It was reported that, in May alone, over [1,200 people died](#) from COVID-19, accounting for nearly half the deaths since the beginning of the pandemic. Health Director-General Noor Hisham Abdullah [has warned](#) that the situation is dire in Penang and Klang Valley – Selangor, Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya, where COVID-19 ICU beds are at overcapacity.

The vaccine programme was launched three months earlier, on 24 February, with a target of 80% of the population vaccinated for immunity by 2021. Only 3.5% of the Malaysian population have been fully vaccinated as of 31 May.

Khairy has attributed the slow pace to [high costs](#) and insufficient supplies of vaccines, with rich countries cornering the market. But the federal government was late in securing and approving vaccines. Malaysia secured its first vaccine deal in November 2020; in contrast, Vietnam had secured a deal by August. As of 30 May 2021, Malaysia has only administered a little over three million doses, slower than Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines.

Earlier vaccine hesitancy has been replaced by demand surging past supply, heightening public frustration. Khairy has since announced that Malaysia will receive close to [16 million doses](#) by July.

Federal-State Disconnect

As of 1 June, Selangor accounts for nearly 40% of the total cases in the country. The state has announced plans to procure 2.5 million doses of vaccines, while the other hard-hit states of Sarawak and Penang have announced their own vaccination programme plans. These states have the fiscal space to begin their own vaccine drives, while others are more dependent on the federal government.

There have been several instances where states have gone against or ignored federal directives. The Johor state assembly, on the [orders of the Sultan](#), was reportedly planning to convene to discuss efforts to improve measures against COVID-19, despite the suspension of the state's legislative powers under the country's current Emergency Ordinance.

In late May, the Sultan also joined others, including Dr Mahathir Mohamad, pressing for a full lockdown. Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin had publicly rejected calls to do so, citing its [massive economic cost](#).

When the third Movement Control Order (MCO 3.0) was announced on 12 May, both Sabah and Sarawak opted to continue with their ongoing conditional movement control orders. Both states continue to impose varying rules under the new lockdown, adding to public confusion.

Even data-sharing and transparency between Selangor and the federal government has been an issue. Selangor COVID-19 Task Force Chair and former health minister Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad has [voiced his frustrations](#) with the federal government.

Political recrimination has severely [undermined public confidence](#) and cooperation and worsened the crisis, creating a vicious cycle. Malaysia has struggled with [mass](#)

[movement of people](#) despite restrictions imposed, and has only been able to register around half of its target population for vaccination.

New Political Dynamics

The federal government has rightly sought to lead and coordinate national efforts to combat COVID-19 and secure vaccine supply. However, it must also identify when it should be flexible and contend with new political dynamics.

The Selangor and Penang state governments are under the Opposition, which are keen to inoculate themselves from public unhappiness. Sarawak is under Gabungan Parti Sarawak (GPS), which is allied to but not part of the ruling PN coalition and is girding for an impending state election.

PN has adopted a more targeted approach, but there is room for more state autonomy. For instance, Sarawak MP Kelvin Yii has suggested that logistics for bringing vaccines to parts of rural Sarawak would be difficult, and thus, administering vaccines that only require one dose would be preferable.

Different policies across states in other federations are not uncommon, such as in Germany and the United States where the central governments have mostly served to complement and support, rather than dictate, state laws and policies, including for COVID-19.

Federal-State Relations Under Strain

Malaysia's constitution heavily favours the federal government through unbalanced responsibilities given to the federal government, uneven revenue splits with state governments, and its ability to overrule state policies in the name of national interests. Some responsibilities are shared, including public health.

States have sought to assert power in the past. The East Malaysian states (Sabah and Sarawak) have a long history of trying to regain their political autonomy. Resource and revenue sharing, specifically oil-production, has been a contentious issue for both, and Kelantan and Terengganu.

With the rise and fall of the Pakatan Harapan government from 2018-2020, and the controversial succession of the PN coalition, federal-state relations and policy implementation have come under increased stress.

Despite the PN government's firm handling of the first COVID-19 wave in 2020, it faced increased political challenge and eventually responded with the declaration of emergency and suspension of Parliament.

This has allowed the PN administration to avoid being challenged but also removed a legitimising forum where political and public frustrations and feedback could be absorbed and used to forge consensus on COVID-19 measures. Malaysia's emergency allows the federal government to amend and create laws at the state level.

The PN is leery of inflicting more pain to curb the virus decisively but a total lockdown

was eventually imposed this week. The government now has to dramatically ramp up vaccination and push down COVID-19 cases, or face increasing challenges from allies and rivals, as well as influential states at the frontlines of combatting COVID-19.

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