



CSIS Commentaries is a platform where policy researchers and analysts can present their timely analysis on various strategic issues of interest, from economics, domestic political to regional affairs. Analyses presented in CSIS Commentaries represent the views of the author(s) and not the institutions they are affiliated with or CSIS Indonesia.

CSIS Commentaries DMRU-095-EN

7 January 2021

COVID-19 countermeasure policies in Southeast Asia

Nuurrianti Jalli

*Assistant Professor of Communication Studies College of Arts and Sciences,
Department of Languages, Literature, and Communication Studies, Northern State University
nuurrianti.jalli@gmail.com*

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the difference in Southeast Asian governments' approaches to COVID-19 could be seen in countermeasures policies implemented by these countries. Specifically looking at five countries; Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines, this article looks at policies adopted by these four Southeast Asian countries in response to the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic and public opinion on such measures. While it is important to note that there has been no regional management of the pandemic—as each country has adapted the different measures to its particular circumstances—some public policies are common to all.

Given the proximity of Southeast Asian countries to China, the coronavirus's epicentre, Southeast Asian countries were among the first affected¹ by the pandemic, crippling economic and social

¹ <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-crisis-response-in-asean-member-states-02f828a2/>

activities in the region. The unprecedented crisis pushed Southeast Asian governments to initiate countermeasures through new policies, which often fall into these two main categories: 1) public health and 2) economy. For example, critics and observers have applauded Thailand², Malaysia³ and Singapore⁴ for stricter implementation of public health policies, especially at the beginning of the outbreak in the region, through national lockdown and strategic communication system keep their citizen informed of the virus. In comparison, countries like Indonesia⁵ and the Philippines⁶ were criticized for downplaying the pandemic's severity by delaying public health efforts due to fear of economic contractions.

For Indonesia and the Philippines, both President Joko Widodo and President Rodrigo Duterte have worked from the outset to shield the economy from a severe collapse that could unbalance their respective countries' finances. As both governments focused on saving their respective economy, both leaders received numerous criticisms for failing to execute comprehensive pandemic⁷ policies to contain the virus's spread in their countries⁸. The rising number of new cases is seen as an indication of public health policies failures. To date, Indonesia is the worst performer in Southeast Asia, with an infection figure of 611,631 infections and 18,653 deaths⁹, while the Philippines has 448,331 infections and 8,730 deaths¹⁰ as of December 13, 2020.

In terms of public policies, Indonesia has maintained partial closures, social distancing, and special budget allocations, which have aggravated the situation far from slowing down or stopping contagion. Concerned mainly with the economy, the government has engaged in a tough fight against the press, abusing the criminal defamation laws and silencing criticism¹¹. The government is also criticized for using substandard COVID-19 test kits below the World Health Organization standard. The Philippines, for their part, has gravitated towards the authoritarianism of President Duterte. After obtaining extraordinary powers from Congress, he has been able to "reallocate, reprogram and realign" the national budget, among other powers that allow for the abuse of power camouflaged under the slogan "the public interest requires it".¹²

The 5 + 1 measure and national lockdown

For Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore, the handling of the pandemic has been quite different. Thailand is a model case not only in Southeast Asia but also globally. With 4209 confirmed cases and 60 deaths¹³, pandemic management has been exemplary. The government's strategy was based on balancing three pillars: public health, the economy, and access to information. The 5+1 policy¹⁴ implemented by the Thai government focuses on the campaign of health safety where citizens are implored to apply the five measures of wearing a mask, washing hands, maintain hygiene, practice

² <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/1939416/7-secrets-of-thai-covid-19-success>

³ <https://www.pmo.gov.my/2020/07/malaysia-recognised-as-one-of-most-successful-in-handling-covid-19/>

⁴ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0275074020942454>

⁵ <https://theconversation.com/nine-months-and-no-progress-what-went-wrong-in-indonesias-covid-19-responses-and-what-can-be-done-145850>

⁶ <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3097707/philippines-failing-contain-coronavirus-despite>

⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-indonesia-insight-idUSKCN25G02J>

⁸ <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3097707/philippines-failing-contain-coronavirus-despite>

⁹ <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/indonesia/>

¹⁰ <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/philippines/>

¹¹ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/paper/2020/12/07/insight-indonesias-poor-covid-19responses-take-a-toll-on-its-global-image.html>

¹² <https://www.rappler.com/nation/covid-19/updates-philippines-december-2020>

¹³ <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/thailand/>

¹⁴ <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2022551/a-more-balanced-narrative-of-thailands-pandemic>

distancing, and avoid congested areas. Citizens also reminded to actively register they whereabouts to ease contact-tracing effort through the additional +1 measure campaign.

Malaysia and Singapore also practised the almost similar approach, which resulted in a manageable number of new cases versus its total population. Malaysia and Singapore recorded 82246 cases (411 deaths)¹⁵, and 58313 (29 deaths)¹⁶, respectively. All three governments also implement a strategic communication system to inform their citizens of the updated statistics and the government's current initiatives to curb the virus's further spread.

All three countries also responded to COVID-19 outbreak in the region by implementing early national lockdowns, way ahead from their counterparts, Indonesia and the Philippines.

The rising issue in Southeast Asian COVID-19 development

In Southeast Asian countries, since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in the region, democracy has been an ongoing issue. Issues include introducing new laws to contain misinformation and declining press freedom in the region as a by-product of the pandemic.

Currently, issues surrounding COVID-19 vaccines are central to public discussion. With most Southeast Asian countries being developing nations, one of the significant concerns among ASEAN is the ability of some ASEAN members to afford COVID-19 vaccines for their citizens. So far, countries like Indonesia, Timor-Leste, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, The Philippines and Vietnam are among the countries expected to receive aid from the 80 million¹⁷ COVID-19 vaccine initiative by the Australian government.

For Muslim-majority Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia¹⁸, Indonesia, and Brunei, data transparency of COVID-19 advances is becoming a hot topic among the public. Many are concerned if the vaccines produced by non-Muslim countries would qualify as Halal because part of its content could contain substances and elements prohibited in Islamic law, such as porcine DNA.

CSIS Indonesia, Pakarti Centre Building, Indonesia 10160
Tel: (62-21) 386 5532 | Fax: (62-21) 384 7517 | csis.or.id

COVID-19 Commentaries Editors

Philips J. Vermonte, Shafiah Muhibat, Vidhyandika Perkasa, Yose Rizal Damuri, Beltsazar Krisetya

¹⁵ <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/malaysia/>

¹⁶ <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/singapore/>

¹⁷ <http://ven.vn/australia-to-support-covid-19-vaccine-access-for-pacific-and-southeast-asian-countries-43754.html>

¹⁸ <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/are-covid-vaccines-halal-malaysia-tries-find-middle-ground>