Malaysia, Singapore adopt deadly “living with COVID” strategy

John Braddock
19 October 2021

Malaysia and Singapore have both moved to reopen their borders and lift certain COVID-19 restrictions as the Southeast Asian neighbours officially dump zero-COVID strategies for a policy of “living with” the virus.

The moves come as governments across the region—including Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia and Vietnam—seek to revive their economies by re-establishing tourism and reopening businesses.

Big business is ramping up pressure across Southeast Asia over the mounting global supply chains crisis. The *Wall Street Journal* noted last month that the surge in COVID-19 cases in the region “has throttled ports and locked down plantations and processors, sparking extended disruptions of raw materials such as palm oil, coffee and tin.”

Singapore is the headquarters of many multinational companies and is one of the world's biggest travel and finance hubs. Changi Airport has had two of its four terminals mothballed since last year after flights plummetted by 76 percent. Ford recently announced its auto factory in Cologne, Germany would pause production of Fiesta models because of a shortage of semiconductors sourced from Malaysian factories hard hit by the pandemic.

Both countries have begun treating the virus as endemic to be dealt with by vaccination, rather than public health restrictions. Despite relatively high vaccination rates, they are dangerously “opening up” while experiencing significant numbers of infections and deaths.

Latest COVID figures attest to the ongoing health crisis. Malaysia’s numbers have trended downward from a daily average peak of 21,571 in late August, but from October 4 to 17 there were still 113,122 cases reported.

Currently 89,173 cases are active, 679 of them critical. On 17 October, 6,145 new cases were confirmed with a seven-day average of 7,299. Malaysia’s total case numbers are a staggering 2.39 million with 27,921 deaths.

On October 17 there were 3,058 cases reported in Singapore with a seven day average of 3,030. There were 44,335 infections confirmed from October 4 to 17, with 25,456 active cases. Singapore has recorded a total of 148,000 cases and 233 deaths, most of them this year.

Despite the ongoing pandemic, Malaysian Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob last week ended Malaysia’s domestic and international travel restrictions for fully vaccinated residents, after the vaccination target of 90 percent of the adult population was reached.

At the same time, Singapore added eight new countries to its vaccinated and quarantine-free travel lanes, the most significant easing of travel restrictions since borders shut last March. Singapore, a city-state of 5.45 million people, currently has 85 percent of the population fully vaccinated.

Both states battled disastrous surges in COVID-19 cases earlier this year, fuelled by the highly infectious Delta variant. They responded by pursuing aggressive zero-COVID policies and imposing strict lockdowns and closing borders.

Singapore was previously among a few countries regarded as a model in combatting COVID-19. In April, Bloomberg gave Singapore a gold star for pandemic management, ranking it in top spot ahead of New Zealand and Australia. It seemed to have mostly suppressed earlier clusters among migrant workers.

Within a month, however, Singapore imported nearly 300 COVID-19 cases from South Asia. The government promptly reduced social gatherings, banned restaurant dining and reinstituted working from home for office workers. It began vaccinating children younger than 16 after pupils at seven schools had to return to home learning because 10 children tested positive.

In August, stocks on the Singapore Exchange fell from a 13-year high as investors reacted to the introduction of the limited restrictions. Singapore Airlines shares closed

© World Socialist Web Site

down 5.7 percent, providing a glimpse of the hostility of the financial elite to any measures that impacted on profits.

In Malaysia, the pandemic was similarly contained through 2020 as the previous government led by Muhyiddin Yassin imposed a strict lockdown and in July announced that the country had zero cases. However, as restrictions were eased, the number of infections and deaths rapidly escalated out of control.

Last January, amid a growing political crisis, Muhyiddin secured the support of the king to declare a state of emergency. When daily COVID cases hit 7,000 in June a "total lockdown" was declared. However, some manufacturing centres continued to operate, becoming transmission sites for the virus, exacerbated by an inadequate testing and contact tracing regime.

A series of anti-government rallies erupted in July, organized mainly by young people, over the government's handling of the pandemic. The "black flag" protests developed into a broad social movement over the voting age, the high unemployment rate among 15- to 30-year-olds, stagnating wages, unaffordable housing, and the lack of any real social safety net in the pandemic.

Malaysia's COVID surge peaked in August with the country reporting tens of thousands of cases per day. Amid a collapsing economy and a gathering political crisis, Muhyiddin resigned, replaced by Ismail Sabri Yaakob of the right-wing United Malays National Organisation.

When the vaccination rate rose to 66 percent the new government officially shifted the strategy to "living with" the virus. Eleven types of economic activities were allowed to resume in mid-August, including car washes, shops, beauty centres and hair salons. Schools began to reopen on October 3 at 50 percent capacity.

Yaakob told a news conference earlier this month: "We have to train ourselves to live with COVID, because COVID may not be eliminated fully." He declared that Malaysia will not impose wide lockdowns again if cases rise.

Health director-general Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah said as the country moves into the "endemic stage" of COVID all Malaysians "have to be prepared to adapt to new norms."

The easing of restrictions means fully vaccinated Malaysians can travel overseas without applying for permission. Domestic journeys will also be allowed, ending the ban on travel across Malaysia's 13 states. The Langkawi islands holiday destination has been reopened to domestic tourists, while reopening the country to international travellers is under consideration.

Singapore also began lifting its restrictions in September as more than 80 percent of the population was fully vaccinated. Case numbers, however, continued to skyrocket throughout the month with over 3,000 new infections reported on average each day. Responding to widespread public concern, authorities were forced to reverse course. Tighter temporary measures included limiting social gatherings to two people and suspending or moving classes online for students age 12 and under.

Under growing pressure from business, however, many of these restrictions are now being removed, even as cases continue to rage. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong declared Singapore cannot "stay locked down and closed off indefinitely," claiming that job losses, separation of families and business closures had caused "psychological and emotional strain and mental fatigue."

In a major public statement on October 9, Lee falsely declared that a zero-COVID strategy was "no longer feasible" given the highly infectious Delta variant, adding that "almost every country has accepted this reality." With vaccinations, he claimed, "the virus has become a mild, treatable disease for most," and urged people to go about their "daily activities" while taking necessary precautions.

Singapore is now being held up internationally as an example of "living with" the virus, despite thousands of new cases daily and continuing deaths.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site