

Malaysia enters “endemic stage” of COVID-19 amid thousands of infections

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Malaysia last week entered what Director General of Health Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah, described as the country’s “endemic stage” of COVID-19, as thousands of new cases continue to be confirmed every day. This will be a “new battlefield,” Noor Hisham declared, in which “all Malaysians have to be prepared to adapt to new norms.”

The “new norms” centre on the public accepting “social discipline.” Noor Hisham told Bernama, the national news agency: “We can only win this war if all of us, all Malaysians, collectively come together as part of our social responsibility to embrace standard operating procedures and guidelines set by the government.”

Last month, Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob warned that citizens had to learn to “live with COVID” because it “may not be eliminated fully.” Lockdowns were “no longer feasible,” he said, claiming that ongoing shutdowns would have “negative implications,” including for the mental health of Malaysians.

The move is an official admission that the government is adopting the homicidal policy of governments around the world, that put the interests of big business over the health and lives of the population. It follows a period in which the Southeast Asian country, with a population of 32.7 million, endured one of the highest infection rates and deaths per capita in the world.

The lifting of restrictions began in mid-August, mainly for small businesses, even as tens of thousands of cases were being recorded daily. Now interstate and overseas travel has resumed and larger businesses such as hotels and the Langkawi holiday centre allowed to open up. Ismail claimed these steps would help speed up economic recovery and give people the opportunity to “improve their livelihoods.”

According to Noor Hisham, last week’s move was justified by an improvement in “key indicators” since the high point of the pandemic during the week of August

22-28. He claimed there had been a consistent decline in the number of daily cases, active cases, fatalities, cases treated in the intensive care unit (ICU) as well as the R-rate recorded over that period.

In fact, this only represents a partial, and temporary, improvement in a dire situation. When case numbers peaked on August 30, there were 19,268 new cases recorded, with a seven-day average of 21,799 infections.

On October 24, there were 5,666 cases with a seven-day average of 5,861. In all from October 11 to 24, there were 92,122 cases. Malaysia’s total case numbers are a staggering 2.43 million with 28,400 deaths. The current drive to “open up” is being undertaken while just 72.8 percent of the population has been fully vaccinated (94.6 percent of adults aged over 18).

According to local experts, the COVID-19 pandemic situation is “not yet over.” Manipal University College Malaysia Professor G. Jayakumar told the *Straits Times* it was “too early to make a definitive conclusion on the downward trend.” The increase in hospitalisation rates was a particular concern, including in the Klang Valley where it had increased 35 percent the previous week. Jayakumar also warned that waning vaccine immunity and the spread of the Delta variant could contribute to another rise in infections.

Molecular virologist Vinod Balasubramaniam from Monash University Malaysia said while the drop in infections was encouraging, Malaysians could “not afford to let their guard down.” He also said the country should expect a “sporadic rise” in cases with the reactivation of tourism and travel.

While both academics expressed vague optimism about the return to “normalcy” by the end of December, all the scientific evidence indicates this is not the case. Among other measures, schools in several states began a reckless reopening from October 3, with 50 percent of students on site at any given time.

School re-opening is taking place internationally with the aim of paving the way for parents to return to work to bolster businesses and profits. Everywhere the result has been a rise in infections among both teachers and students. In the United States, nearly 2 million children have been infected with COVID, with 6,523 hospitalized and 200 dead since July. Over 50,000 school age children in the UK are currently suffering from Long-COVID.

The *Straits Times* reported considerable concern among parents and students over the school re-openings. Salina Saad said “given a choice,” she would not send her 18-year-old daughter to school yet, even though she is fully vaccinated. Muhammad Faiz Abdul Rahman, 19, is fully vaccinated but said he is “still worried about the COVID-19 situation.” Rahman said he was “nervous” about going back to school with cases still high.

The homicidal policy of “herd immunity” is being pursued by a crisis-ridden ruling elite, which is turning in an ever more reactionary direction. The current government, led by Ismail’s right-wing United Malays National Organisation, has only been in office since August. Ismail is the country’s third prime minister in less than four years after previous Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, who took office in 2018, was forced to resign.

The political instability reflects rising popular discontent over social inequality, entrenched corruption, and autocratic methods of rule. Opposition intensified as a result of the Muhyiddin government’s gross mishandling of the pandemic, which saw extended lockdowns fuel massive job losses but without adequate assistance for the unemployed. The limited measures failed to reduce COVID-19 cases.

Restrictions in Malaysia, the world’s second-largest producer of palm oil prevented migrant labourers from travelling to plantations, raising prices of the edible oil used to make everything from candy bars and shampoo to biofuel. The shuttering of factories also contributed to the global supply chain crisis, with essential components for manufacturing, such as semiconductors, delayed.

The Malaysian economy expected to grow by only 3–4 percent this year. According to official statistics, GDP increased 16.1 percent in the second quarter of 2021 after four consecutive quarters of contraction. The growth was attributed solely to the low base recorded in the second quarter of 2020. The Department of Statistics warned that the latest short-term economic indicators signal that the economy “is anticipated to face challenges in preserving the recovery momentum.”

Muhyiddin’s resignation came after a strike by thousands of junior contract doctors over their fight for greater job security, followed by a series of protests organized mainly by young people in July and August. The #BenderaHitam (black flag) movement developed into a broad social opposition over the voting age, high unemployment rate among 15 to 30-year-olds—almost double the national average—stagnating wages, unaffordable housing and the lack of any real social safety net.

The movement erupted after lawmakers from the ruling National Alliance sought to discredit a previous social media campaign, #BenderaPutih (white flag), aiming to help people in need of food and other essentials, amid a surge in suicide cases due to job losses and slashed incomes. Tens of thousands of people have reportedly been involved in protest activities, including on social media and with public displays of black flags.

Police responded by launching an investigation into the black flag movement for purportedly harbouring alleged “seditious elements.” They detained at least 47 participants for questioning.

The protests initially centered on their demands for Muhyiddin’s resignation. However, the deepening opposition sentiment, while still at an early stage, coincides with movements elsewhere in Southeast Asia, especially in Myanmar and Thailand, as the pandemic continues to rage through the region’s combined population of 655 million people. The emerging class struggles will inevitably intersect with those of workers in the major imperialist centres.



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